

FRUITS OF MISFORTUNE CAN BE SWEET

Psalm 119:71

"It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes" (Psalm 119:71).

"It is good for me to have been in trouble" (Moffatt).

David is looking back upon his yesterdays. He is taking a glance at the way along which he has come. That way had not been through green pastures and beside still waters altogether. His had not been the sheltered life. More than one tempest had broken upon him. Often rude winds had struck him. Here and there treasures to which he clung with passionate devotion had been ruthlessly snatched from his hands. More than once his face had been wet with a gush of hot and blinding tears.

As he looks back on those days of stress and strain, he is conscious of the fact that they have not resulted half so disastrously as he thought they would as he was passing through them. In fact, he sees now, with joyous amazement, that they had not brought him any abiding harm at all. On the contrary, they had brought him abiding good.

The very trouble that David thought was going to work his utter undoing has been the making of him. His losses have become gains, and his calamities have been changed into capital. He realizes that he had some lessons to learn which his afflictions or misfortunes taught him. When he was in ease and prosperity he had grown careless. He did not greatly feel his need of God. In verse sixty-seven he says, "Before I was afflicted I went astray." But God allowed some affliction to come along which brought him to his senses, and constrained him to take stock of his spiritual experiences.

We are not told as to the nature of his trouble. It may have been some obvious and visible calamity which everyone could see. For weary years his own life may have been one long battle with pain, or he may have suffered from some sorrow which the world did not know. He may have bled from some hidden wound. Although we do not know the nature of his trouble, we are sure of this, that his life had not been without its tragic experiences.

We are separated from this ancient psalmist by seas and continents and centuries. We are separated from him by widely differing customs and by widely differing modes of living. Yet we are like him in this, that we have our troubles. We can thank God that life has not been all shadows with any of us; neither has it been all sunshine. To all, sooner or later, there comes a day of bewilderment and trouble. Affliction of one kind or another comes to every one of us in the course of life.

"Men die, but sorrow never dies;
The crowded years divide in vain,
And the wide world is knit with ties
Of common brotherhood in pain."

Not a one of us is particularly fond of trouble. Our natural reaction to it is antagonistic. Most of us, and perhaps all of us, think that the untroubled life is the ideal life, and when some misfortune opens the door and stalks in, we treat it as an intruder, and bitterly resent its presence. So, when we hear a man say, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted," we are inclined to question either his judgment or his sincerity.

Our text was spoken and recorded by a man who had his full share of affliction. In his youth he suffered cruel treatment from King Saul. This jealous and cowardly king had

hunted him from place to place seeking his life, and not giving him any rest. It was a terrible experience for one who had lived the tranquil life of a shepherd. The call of the Lord's anointed had brought him nothing but privation, suffering and the constant possibility of death.

In his later life David's soul was afflicted through the treachery of his son Absalom, who stole the hearts of the people and usurped his father's throne. David was compelled to journey to a strange land for safety. Is there any greater affliction than to be cruelly treated by one you love deeply, and for whom you would sacrifice your life, should the need arise?

But David's greatest affliction was of his own making. His dark sins of lust and murder were followed with great anguish of spirit. As David recounted his afflictions, both those which were sent of God and those of his own making, he realized that they had worked for his good. He said: "Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now I have kept thy word" (Psalm 119:67).

In the school of affliction David learned many valuable lessons which made life richer, nobler and purer. Life's afflictions are meant to bring us nearer to God, to enrich the soul, to enlarge and ennoble the personality, and to make us more serviceable to God and man.

Every life has its own peculiar afflictions and misfortunes. No one is immune from trial and tribulation. Sooner or later, the cold, biting wind of adversity beats against us, and life loses its tranquility and joy. Health fails, loved ones are laid low and then, after anxious days of watching and waiting, they are taken from us. Perhaps one we fondly loved and from whom we expected so much goes far astray, and disappoints us keenly. Maybe we suffer affliction of soul through some hidden sin, some secret fear, some physical disability.

I have known many cheerful Christian souls who could give the same testimony that David did. They would say that, paradoxical as it seems, misfortune can be fortunate, that, rightly handled, adversity can do for men and women what the untroubled life can never do. They would tell us that they know from experience that David was speaking the truth, that some loss or disappointment or illness had left them with blessings they never would have known otherwise.

However, we do not mean to say that affliction is good for everybody. Some people have been soured by affliction. They fell into trouble and they rebelled against God on account of it; and so the trouble did not work in them any permanent good; rather it developed their combative tendencies, and ever since they have remained with their hands against others, compelling others to lift their hands against them. We have known individuals who seem to have a spite against other people, and that simply because they themselves were disappointed in their own lives. They grew sour, and then have become more sour every day. It is not good for some people to have afflictions, and yet it is not the fault of the affliction; rather it is the fault of the persons afflicted.

What are some of the fruits of misfortune which can be sweet?

I. It Draws One Nearer To God.

Experience and observation teach us that affliction draws one nearer to God. When we are prosperous and our way is smooth, we are very apt to become proud, ambitious, covetous and worldly. Our love for money excludes or expels our love for God, for His Word, His Will, His Way and His Service. In his success David somehow lost the peace of soul and the favor of God which he formerly possessed and enjoyed. As the vessel makes for the harbor in the storm, so the soul, buffeted by the wind of adversity, seeks its refuge in God.

Affliction does for us what prosperity can never do, it robs us of our foolish pride, our boastfulness, and our self-confidence, and it causes us to realize our weaknesses, helplessness and the necessity of dependence on God. When trouble comes God becomes more real, prayer more helpful, and the Word more precious. Then we sing with a new meaning: "Nearer, my God to Thee, Nearer to Thee!

E'en though it be a cross That raiseth me;
Still all my song shall be,
Nearer, my God, to Thee."

II. It Tempers The Soul.

The blacksmith must heat and soften the steel before he can work it and make it conform to his will. Even so, the soul which tends to become hardened and selfish needs to be put through the fire of affliction to soften it, and to make one more thoughtful, more sympathetic, and more loving. Those wonderful graces of tenderness, thoughtfulness, gentleness and patience are the fruits of sorrow and suffering.

III. It Develops The Best In Us.

The untroubled life is often shallow and frivolous. Generally speaking, the deeper and richer lives are those that, one time or another, have had it hard. An Armenian and an American were talking about the shallow tastes of so many Americans in literature and in music. When the American asked the Armenian why, in his judgment, the rank and file in this country do not relish and appreciate the deeper and finer things, his reply was: "I don't think America has suffered enough."

Prior to the French Revolution, Marie Antoinette was a silly, superficial girl, enjoying the surface pleasures of Versailles with scarcely a serious thought. But when at last the Revolution broke, and she faced disaster and death, Marie Antoinette turned into a woman of wisdom and depth. The court at Versailles had never released her finer qualities. It took calamity to bring them out. Such is often the case.

"I walked a mile with Pleasure,
She chattered all the way,
But left me none the wiser
For all she had to say.

I walked a mile with Sorrow,
And ne'er a word said she;
But, oh, the things I learned from her
When Sorrow walked with me!"

—Robert Browning Hamilton

Affliction will do for us what nothing else will do. It develops the best in us and greatly increases our influence for the Lord.

IV. It Safeguards Us From Certain Dangers.

Someone said: "Often our trials act as a thornhedge to keep us in the good pastures." Many Christian lives would have remained hard, sterile and unfruitful had God not plowed and harrowed them with affliction. The Holy Spirit could not get full possession of them, and He could not work through them, until they were broken by affliction.

Trouble can be a wonderful quickener; that is, it can wake us up. Years ago, a coachman driving a pair of horses was noticed by one who sat upon the boxseat to give a cut of the whip to the off horse. The animal was going along quite properly and it seemed a needless cruelty to whip it. On another journey he observed the coachman doing just the same at the same place, and he said: "I always notice that you give that horse a cut of the whip just here,—why is it?" The driver replied, "Well, sir, he has a nasty habit of shying just at this spot, and I take his attention off by making him think of the whip for a moment." Every now and then there is the tendency to shy, to yield to temptation, and an affliction takes off our attention from temptation.

V. It Teaches Us A Lesson In Spiritual Values.

Our Lord is ever seeking to teach us, through the adversities, misfortunes, losses and disappointments of life, the importance of discounting earth's scale of values and putting a premium on heaven's scale. Whatever measure we learn of that lesson will turn out to be immeasurably beneficial to ourselves and eternally glorifying to God.

Possibly bereavement is the sorest test of one's trust in God. Yet bereavement has often been overruled to draw the bereaved one into closer fellowship with God, and to constrain that one to labor more earnestly than ever to glorify the Lord and to lay up treasures in heaven. Dr. James Young Simpson, the discoverer of chloroform and the founder of modern anesthetics, was greatly distressed in his later years by the loss of several of his children. But those bereavements were overruled to lead him to labor for God, and for the salvation of souls in a way which, probably, he never would have done otherwise. On his deathbed his son "Jamie", who died in his fifteenth year, had said, "We must speak for Jesus, for it is a glorious thing to do." That remark of his dying boy resulted in the old professor going out into the highways and byways to uplift Christ and to exhort men and women to put their trust in Him. "Sweet are the uses of adversity."

VI. It Develops The Choicest Graces.

Some virtues or graces cannot be produced or developed apart from misfortune, trouble or affliction. Patience is one of them. Patience is from a word that means to suffer; and patience is produced by suffering quietly, submissively and uncomplainingly. One can scarcely be patient unless he has endured tribulation, "for tribulation worketh patience." A patient Christian is the product of adversity.

Humility is rated in the Bible as one of the greatest of all graces. Not many things are more humbling as to be laid low and rendered helpless and dependent by sickness or accident.

There is a very sweet grace called sympathy, but it is seldom found in persons who have not had any trouble. Christ Jesus learned sympathy by being tempted in all ways like we are tempted. If He had not felt our infirmities, He would not have been touched with a fellow-feeling towards us. You know how hard it is to get sympathy out of those who have never endured a trial similar to your own. It is by passing through the fire that we know how to sympathize with and deal with people who are in the furnace.

It is not true that the people to whom you and I instinctively turn in times of deep trouble are those who have suffered, and have won a spiritual victory over it? It takes suffering to understand suffering; it takes heartache to appreciate heartache; it takes loneliness to sympathize with loneliness. One reason people turn so readily

to Jesus Christ is because they know that He has run the full gamut of human suffering and can therefore understand their case, and help them. Misfortune can enlarge our capacity to understand and to help other people.

VII. It Makes Vital One's Relationship To God.

You have never seen an untroubled life that was deeply and profoundly spiritual. No man plumbs the depths of the spiritual life until it becomes necessary for him to do so. You know that the times in your life when God was most real to you were those times when you needed Him most. It was through some hard and unwanted experience that you really came to know Him, and to feel His loving presence with you. Only then did you discover that peace that passes understanding; only, then were you "strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man." God's promises became real to you when you claimed them and tested them. It is only in the midst of tragedy that some are redeemed from worldliness and destroying sin.

On April 18, 1906, when the great earthquake and fire came to San Francisco, 300,000 people were turned into the streets, homeless, foodless, and without any clothing except what they were wearing. The terrible fire burned from five-fifteen on Wednesday morning until late Friday afternoon. It was finally checked, not by the use of water, for the earthquake had broken the water mains and there was not any water to be had, but by the use of dynamite, blowing up whole blocks of buildings to arrest the further progress of the fire.

This is a splendid illustration of what has to happen in many lives. The fire of godlessness and sin spreads in the soul until it threatens to bring moral and spiritual ruin. To dynamite certain precious areas of our lives with misfortune seems cruel, but there are times when nothing less severe will arrest the progress of the blaze. It is a merciful God Who permits calamity to bring His rebellious and wandering children home again.

VIII. It Releases Tremendous Powers.

Misfortune, trouble and tragedy have been the means of lifting many a life from idleness to serviceableness, and from mediocrity to genius. Much of the greatness of humanity has been produced by suffering. Tennyson's grief for his dead friend, Arthur Hallam, gave birth to his greatest poem, "In Memoriam." John Bunyan would probably have lived and died as an inconspicuous tinker except for the twelve years that he spent in a dungeon in the jail in Bedford, England, for it was there that he wrote his immortal "Pilgrim's Progress."

Fairly early in his career, Beethoven felt the darkening shadows of his inevitable deafness. At first he was in despair, which was quite natural. He wrote these lines, "What a sorrowful life I must now live; how happy I would be if my hearing were completely restored,....but as it is I must draw back from everything, and the most beautiful years of my life will take wings without accomplishing all the promise of my talent and my powers!" But Beethoven's affliction proved to be, not the end, but the beginning of his greatness as a composer. Listen to one of his biographers, a man who himself was a musician: "We are eternal debtors to his deafness. It is doubtful if such lofty music could have been created except as self-compensation for some affliction, and in the utter isolation which that affliction brought about."

It is a fact that misfortune often succeeds where ease and prosperity fail. Many people will never rise to their fullest usefulness without misfortune, affliction or suffering. Their hidden powers will never be released until some cruel

experience breaks through and sets them free. As Edwin Markam said:

"Defeat may serve as well as victory
To shake the soul and let the glory out."

Please remember that regardless of what your misfortune, affliction, trouble or suffering may be, the fruit thereof can be sweet provided you completely yield yourself to the Lord and the doing of His precious will.