

FORTUNATE MISFORTUNE

"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." Psalm 119:71 (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 altogether through green pastures and beside still waters. His had not been the sheltered life. More than one tempest had broken upon him. Often rude winds had pelted him with their cruel fists. 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 upon 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 have brought him no abiding harm at all. On the contrary, they have brought abiding good. The very trouble that he 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 troubles taught him. When he was in ease and prosperity he had grown careless. He did not greatly feel his need of God. In verse 67 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.

Just the nature of his trouble we are not told. 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 a 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, but neither has it been all sunshine. To all, sooner or later, there comes a day of bewilderment and trouble.

None of us is particularly fond of trouble. Our natural reaction to it is antagonistic. Most of us, and perhaps all of us, feel 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 to have been in trouble," we are inclined to question either his judgment or his sincerity.

But there are a great many people who could and would give a similar testimony. 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 could never do. They would tell us that they know from their own 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; and so the trouble did not work in them any permanent good; it rather developed their combative

tendencies and ever since they have remained with their hands against other men, 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 were disappointed in early life, or had made a venture and sustained the loss. They grew sour, they have completely soured, and they grow sourer every day. It is not good for some people to have been afflicted, and yet it is not the fault of the affliction; it is the fault of the persons afflicted.

I. What are some of the Ways in which Misfortune can be Fortunate?

1. It serves to deepen our lives.

The untroubled life is often shallow and frivolous. Generally speaking, the deeper, richer lives are the lives 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 the deeper and finer things, his reply was: "I don't think America has suffered enough." Robert Browning Hamilton wrote,

"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!"

2. It preserves us from certain dangers.

As someone has said, "Often our trials act as a thornhedge to keep us in the good pastures." Many Christian lives would have remained hard, and 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. A coachman driving a pair of horses was noticed by one who sat upon the box-seat 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.

3. It teaches us a lesson in spiritual values.

The Lord is ever seeking to teach us, through the adversities, losses and disappointment of life, the importance of discounting earth's scale of values and putting 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 the 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."

4. It produces good things in our lives.

Some virtues cannot be produced in us apart from trouble or affliction.

One of them is patience. One can scarcely be patient unless he has endured tribulation, "for tribulation worketh patience." A patient Christian is the off-spring of adversity.

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 as we are. If He had not felt our infirmities He would not have been touched with a fellow-feeling toward 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 deal with people who are in the furnace.

Is it 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 men 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 cares, and help them. Misfortune can unlatch our capacity to understand and help other people.

5. It releases undreamed of powers.

Trouble and tragedy have been the means of lifting many a life from idleness to service-ability 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 great poem, "IN MEMORIAM". John Bunyan would probably have lived and died an inconspicuous tinker except for twelve years in a dungeon in Bedford Jail, 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 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, for the most beautiful years of my life will take wings without accomplishing all the promise of my talent and my charms!" 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 was himself 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."

II. What are some of the Attitudes that we may Assume in facing misfortunes?

1. Surrender to them.

There are those who complain that life has never dealt so harshly with others as with themselves. They focus all their attention on their wretchedness. Thus surrendering they add to their own troubles and to those of their fellow men.

2. To become hard and cynical.

This is really only another way of surrendering. This is the surrender of the strong while the other is the surrender of the weak.

3. Refuse to surrender to them.

Like the psalmist we can refuse to surrender to our sorrows either by turning cowards or by becoming calloused and hard. Instead we can make capital out of our calamities and change our losses into gains. Those who do so are the most winsome and useful souls in the world.