

DESIRES THAT DEADEN

"And he gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul" (Psalm 106:15).

There are two questions that will provide you ample food for thought. One is, "Why was I born?" The other is, "What am I living for?" Few people ask such questions nowadays. They will not take the time to think through to adequate answers. Besides, these questions might involve them in some troublesome thoughts and soul-searching, which modern people sedulously avoid. It is little wonder that many are unable to face life today. They cannot even face themselves.

Look at the increasing toll that suicide is taking. Significantly it is manifested not among the homeless and the poor, but most notably in the ranks of the middle class, the upper middle class, and the well-to-do. Many of these victims have enjoyed every material comfort and luxury of our civilization, yet they seek to escape from life. To what terrible extremities a human being is driven when he concludes, "This is the best way out." What a confused and bewildered generation! All too many people, young and old alike, lack a sense of purpose or mission in life. They do not have any spiritual resources with which to meet opposition and disappointment. Life has lost whatever meaning it may have had for them. What so many people lack today, and this is especially true of youth, is "a faith to live by" and "a purpose to live for." There is a spiritual vacuum at the center of their being. They are the very personification of the "empty house" against which Christ has warned us--an empty house waiting for seven demons to come and occupy it. If life is to have meaning, we must find a purpose for living which is beyond and greater than ourselves.

Nothing brings out more effectively the heroism latent in humanity than the necessity of facing obstacles and discouragements. At his best man craves a challenging task, and the harder the better. Obstacles become a spur to effort. Where would Florence Nightingale have been save for the miseries caused by the Crimean War, or Sir Wilfred Grenfell without the frozen waters of Labrador, or Dr. Albert Schweitzer had it not been for the disease-ridden masses of Africa? The difficulties they faced helped to make them truly great.

Why should there be such widespread disenchantment and heart-emptiness in our time? Part of the explanation is found in the age in which we live. Most adults living today have experienced two World Wars, the bitter conflict in Korea, and the war in Vietnam. Every war leaves physical and moral scars as its aftermath. War has a shattering effect on moral standards. It weakens faith in an overruling Providence. It leaves masses of people disillusioned. Another part of the explanation, and one that applies to Americans especially, is that our "economy of abundance" has definitely made life easier for us, but in many instances has made character softer. There is a parallel between present-day life in America and that in the Roman Empire when Christ was born. All menial tasks in that Empire were performed by the sixty million slaves who inhabited it. Our slaves today are not human beings, but they are a multitude of labor-saving devices which have eliminated so much drudgery. As with the Romans, we are developing a far from constructive attitude toward work. Pride in workmanship has become in wide areas a thing of the past. Too often the day's duty is a wearisome task to be concluded as soon as possible so that we may enjoy our leisure.

In First Samuel 8 we read that the elders of Israel approached Samuel the prophet and said: "Now make us a king to judge us like all the nations." That was their way of expressing their desire for a change. It is true that changes are sometimes needful. The old is not always necessarily the best, even though some imagine that it must be. But, at the same time, new things are not necessarily better just because they are new.

In this request there was the desire for something different, without having thought the matter through. This desire for something different often takes hold of us, especially when we are downhearted, or frustrated, or not well. If only things were different! If only I did not have to live with so-and-so! If only my work were less monotonous! And so we groan under our imagined disabilities. The desire for something different is often no more than the symptom of our restlessness, or even of our rebellion against the way God is taking us.

This request contained something which is a most serious weakness in so many of us. Look at this verse again. "Make us a king to judge us like all the nations." It was a desire to be like other people. Do you ever find that your irritability, your impatience, and your way of praying are dictated merely by the desire that your circumstances might be like those of somebody else? This is a pitiful mistake for us to make, but how frequently we make it! Others are not necessarily happier. If the elders of Israel had taken the trouble to ask some of the other nations how they were managing under their kings, they might have learned that the idea of a monarchy was not so good after all. There is nothing more foolish than to imagine "the other fellow" is so much happier than you are. There is many a heartache in the other person of which you know nothing.

Perturbed by their request, Samuel probably began to wonder whether or not the people had turned against him. God allayed the fears of His servant, and, at the same time, indicated a matter that was far more grave. God said: "They have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them." Their clamor amounted to nothing less than a rejection of God, although they did not recognize this motive in themselves. It was to Israel's advantage to be under the rule of God. So also is it with us. In our fancied wisdom we see the things we would like to possess and rebel against God because He does not grant them. But this is short-sighted indeed.

"He gives the very best to those
Who leave the choice to Him."

God warned the people of what the granting of their request would mean to them. But the people were obdurate, as perhaps you are inclined to be because God hasn't given you what you wanted, and said: "Nay; but we will have a king over us; that we also may be like all the nations." How senseless is the stubbornness of some people! Do you still insist on some request being granted, even after God has shown you plainly that He has another way for you?

"The Lord said to Samuel, Harken unto their voice, and make them a king." That is the most awful sentence in the passage, "Make them a king." Their request was their doom. All too often it is true that our worst sorrows are those which we bring down upon our own heads. "He gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul." Are you going to keep on and on after God has shown you by His Spirit what is the best way? I warn you that you can keep on until God says, "Let him have it," "Give it to her"; and immediately the thing becomes bitter.

When God delivered the Israelites by the miracle at the Red Sea, and their enemies were destroyed as they pursued after them, the children of Israel at first were very grateful and sang the praises of God. But they soon forgot God's wonderful work in delivering them. On their journey through the wilderness they had been saved from starvation by the manna which fell from heaven for them. They grew tired of this. They wanted a different diet, or, as we would say, a high standard of living. Giving expression to their feelings, they broke out into a very complaining mood and asked, "Why doesn't God give us flesh to eat?" Through their hearts there surged the desire for the old fleshpots

of Egypt. They wanted a change. They were not satisfied with what God was providing and doing for them.

There are very few families, if any, in which the children at some time or another have not complained of the food spread upon the table. Hungry as they may be, appetizing as the meals are, in most families there is a boy or a girl who is not easily pleased, and who is disposed to complain when the family is seated around the table--"And why have we got this for dinner today." Well, the Lord has a family of grumbling children, too. Many of them have a very bad habit of finding fault with both their physical and their spiritual food, and wanting something different.

Our text has a message for all such murmurers and grumblers. They grumbled to Moses, their human leader, but the Lord heard their complaint. He interpreted it as their desire or prayer. Their mood, which God recognized as their prayer, was a protest against the divine government, and the provisions of divine Providence. They wanted something else than the food which God provided for them. They had a desire to live on the carnal plane, to live just like natural men, and to live without communication with the upper and unseen realm.

Not getting what we want in life is a common cause for complaint. We often think that life is difficult and unfair because we do not get what we want. Our real prayer is what we most desire, whether we put it into words or not; it is not just what we say with our lips, but what we seek with our hearts.

What we urgently desire we tend to get, for it is secretly shaping our lives. Usually we get what we desire if we set our hearts on getting it. The desire coordinates all our powers for the attainment of this objective. This is oftentimes true of one who has set as his goal in life the making of money. If this should be the one insistent demand he makes on his opportunities, the chances are that he will succeed. All his faculties will be trained to this end. His wits will be sharpened. His powers of acquisitiveness will be heightened. He will find, of course, that his lust for gain will blind him to many of God's best gifts. The simplest and loveliest things of life will begin to pall on him. Nevertheless, he will get what he requests.

Even though the children of Israel were grown up, they often acted like silly babies. While they were in slavery in Egypt, they had to work hard and did not have enough to eat. Then, when the Lord sent Moses to deliver them from bondage, and He gave them plenty to eat, and took care of them in every way, they were disappointed and wished that they were back in Egypt again. They always wanted something they did not have. We say that they were a queer lot, but so often we are just as silly as they were. We are always wanting something that we do not have. We are so prone to think that what somebody else has is much better than what we have. We often get just what we want, and then we decide that we do not want it.

Our text tells us that God "gave them their request." It is a solemn truth that God often allows men to have their own way. God granted the request of the Israelites on the material and temporal plane--He gave them flesh to eat. I charge you not to assume too readily that you are favored of heaven simply because you have prospered in material things. Because your view of life has been material, and the boundaries of your life have been temporal, it may be that the children of whom you are so proud by and by will show a stronger appetite for the things of the flesh than for the things of the Spirit. It may be that God will be granting your request, because that has been the prayer of your whole life.

This suggests that we must be very careful about what it is we ask from God or from life, for we may get it, and it may have undesirable consequences or disastrous results. On the road to the Promised Land the children of Israel got tired of the hardships and privations that were its price. They preferred economic security to political freedom, as many do today. They only wanted to be comfortable and well-fed. That was what they cried out for, and they got what they requested, but at the cost of their souls, or the loss of their capacity for fellowship with God. Into their souls God sent leanness. This is a world in which we cannot come to our best if we are content to live merely on the level of animals. Sometimes God teaches us by letting us take what we insist on having and pay for it in the ruin and starvation of our souls.

In the mercy of God, however, this does not always happen. God's most gracious answer to our requests, spoken or unspoken, may be a denial. Our desires and ambitions may be thwarted. Life does not always fit into the pattern of our self-centered dreams. We have to do without some of the things for which we crave. But there is a blessing behind these denials. A rich man took his son to a prominent school and said to the administrator: "I had a very hard time in my youth, and I'm not going to have my son go through the same. He's to have everything he wants, as much money as he likes to spend." The head of the school said: "I'm sorry, but we cannot take your boy into this school." "Why not?" said the indignant father. "Because he would ruin himself, and what is worse, he would ruin the school. You are seeking to deprive your son of an essential element in his education, which is the discipline of doing without. You have won your position and character through these very hardships from which you want to protect him."

One writer spoke wisely when he said, "No one is educated who does not know how to meet the negations of life." They have to be accepted, of course. But we may resent them, or feel cheated, or become bitter and envious of those who have the things we lack. But there are things to be won through many of life's deprivations. They provide a stimulus to effort. The real prize of ambition is not success, but the qualities we develop in the struggle. When life says "no" we learn that there are other wills than ours which have to be considered. Above all, we may discover that behind everything is the will of God, whose purpose for us can often be served only by the denial of our own selfish purposes.

Men ask for this or that, and insist upon the gratification of their desires. Because people are disappointed and complain about what God does for them, He frequently gives them what they want. But their desires often prove to be injurious. A child may cry for a green apple and keep on doing so until the mother, just to satisfy him and to teach him a lesson, lets him have it. After he eats it and has a severe case of stomach ache, he learns that he did not want what he asked for and got. It is not always good for people to get what they want. Adults often get what they desire, but, after receiving it, wish they had not done so. As Moffatt translates our text: "He let them have what they desired, then--made them loathe it."

God has so arranged it that people frequently get pretty much what they really set their hearts on. As Emerson once wrote, "Young man, be careful what you want, for you will surely get it." Our real trouble is that we get what we want, and so frequently, when we do, we don't want it. Our wants get inside us and color our lives. When we receive what we seek, we may find that it has not brought us what we really wanted, and in the process our souls have been starved.

All desires, whether good or bad, exact of us a price. In general it may be said that for the fulfillment of good and worthy desires you must pay beforehand, whereas for the desires that are evil and unworthy you pay afterward. As Savonarola said: "Would you rise in the world? You must work while others amuse themselves. Are you desirous of a reputation for courage? You must risk your life. Would you be strong morally and physically? You must resist temptation. All this is paying in advance. Observe the other side of the picture: the bad things are paid for afterwards."

Early in life we face the necessity of sitting in judgment on our desires, and saying to some, "You may enter," and to others, "You must stay out." We should learn to surrender our desires to the lordship of Christ. Without Christ man is mastered by his desires. Without Christ, desires have the man; and constantly they deaden him. With Christ as master of the desires, they vitalize him. Ever remember that what we have out of Christ we eventually loathe, and what we have in Christ we love. Let us be sure that we make the right choice. It is the choice between God's way and our own way. It is a choice between what Christ asks of us, and what we want for ourselves. His will and His way are always best for us.