

WHAT A MAN LEARNED IN CHURCH

"When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me; Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end" (Psalm 73:16-17).

As George Eliot reminded us, the heart of humanity is the same through the years, ever pulsating to the same great needs, the same great loves, and the same great longings. I suppose that all of us have had that Monday morning, blue feeling; that down-in-the dumps, what's-the-use-of-anything mood that enshrouds our spirits like a fog. Almost anything can cause it -- temperament, sickness, disappointment, or even a change in the weather.

As the Psalmist looked back across his yesterdays, and viewed the road along which he had traveled, he noted one place where he had encountered difficulty. Without hesitation he shared with his readers the experience which he had. He very freely admitted that he had been subjected to great temptation. He very frankly confessed that his feet had slipped. He also acknowledged that he had acted ignorantly and foolishly.

Over what did the Psalmist stumble? He was greatly perplexed at God's ordering of things. For the life of him, he could not understand how the infinite and holy God could govern the world in the manner in which he thought that the world of his day was being governed. The beginning of his difficulty was that the facts of life that he observed and experienced failed to check with his faith. He believed that the man who did right would come out first and best, while the man who did wrong would meet with disaster along the way. He was confident that a good man prospered financially as well as spiritually. He had the notion that a bad man would be certain to go to the wall financially and otherwise. That same idea was held by the would-be comforters of Job. When they saw that Job was a great sufferer, they at once concluded that he was a great sinner, and very frankly said so.

There were people all about the Psalmist who ignored God, and who had little or no respect for the rights of others, and yet they seemed to prosper. The Psalmist was unable to understand why God blessed some of them more than He did many of the righteous. The prosperity of the wicked got the Psalmist down. When they laughed and jeered at holy and sacred things, in much the same manner that many today ridicule reverence, honesty, and purity as being old-fashioned and back-woodsy, the Psalmist was badly shaken and nearly fell. His perplexity was not surprising, but quite understandable.

His problem was aggravated by a warped philosophy and twisted thinking. He had been brought up on the idea that prosperity was the mark of God's approval and adversity the evidence of His wrath; that if you were the kind of person you ought to be -- read the Bible, prayed, went to church, and paid your tithe -- you had a right to expect God to give you a good crop, long life, and to protect you from adversity. He thought that it was God's business to look after His people and to prosper them.

Remember how Job was puzzled when things didn't work out in favor of the righteous. He could not understand why calamity should fall on him, a righteous man. What did all these troubles mean, boils and bad things, if not that God was displeased? Lots of people believe it still, in spite of Christ and the cross and what He said about the impartiality of providence -- rain falling on the just and the unjust. Remember the old-time Horatio Alger stories? They always had a bad boy and a good boy. The bad boy got the stick and the good boy got the pie. Just like that -- the whole moral order neatly arranged for the prosperity and protection of the righteous.

What shook the Psalmist was that something obviously had gone wrong with the formula. His creed was shaken by the facts, and his philosophy was denied by the events. He saw the righteous suffer and, what was worse, the ungodly prospered. He wrestled with the problem of how that could be in a God-ordered world, and the thought of it pushed at his tortured mind until it shoved him down into the dumps. He questioned, What's the use of being good?

When in perplexity about this problem, the Psalmist absented himself from the house of worship. Naturally he fell into doubt and despair. Finally somebody induced him to return to the house of worship and there enter into delightful fellowship with God.

He said, "I went into the sanctuary of God." That is the best first-aid therapy I know, just to be reminded that God is. People today are afraid, innocently whipped, beaten down by the hammer blows of the world's enormous evil, and fearful of where and how it's coming out. Just to be reminded that God is helps -- just to know that above the fog and darkness there is God. Many a person, like Tolstoi, has been lifted out of deep despondency just by the thought of God. Tolstoi went through a period of deep anxiety. Nothing made sense to him, nothing seemed worthwhile. He had rope lest in an unguarded moment he might take his life. And he came out of it by the thought of God. He kept saying over and over to himself, "The eternal God is my refuge," until, bit by bit there was an uprush of hope in him and his heart grew quiet and composed. Would it not help many frightened people today to get a sure glimpse of God, and to know that above the fog and darkness and danger there is God?

"I went into the sanctuary of God." There it was revealed to him that he had been wrong in regarding the temporary prosperity of the wicked as being permanent. There is no use in keeping your mind pounding on the problem or looking for a solution in the newspaper. You get nothing out of that but more darkness. The more you keep your mind on your own sickness, the weaker you become. You have got to lift your mind to where strength is and fix your mind on God. A wise person said: "When we look within ourselves we see our weaknesses and get discouraged; when we look around us we see the confusion and get distracted; when we look above we see Him and get empowered." We need to be reminded that God is.

Then, too, in the sanctuary he got his tangled thinking straightened out. That is important. Most of our low moods come out of tangled, twisted, warped thinking. One person said, "When a machine creaks, shutters, and shakes, fails to perform efficiently, it is a victim of either bad design or bad management. But when a man is gloomy inside, grouchy, bad-tempered, and habitually despondent, he is most likely a victim of his own bad thinking." It was so with the Psalmist. Looking back on his low mood, he said, "So foolish was I, and ignorant: I was as a beast before thee" (verse 22).

Apparently we have to be reminded over and over that the purpose of religion is not to make us happy, make us prosper, cure our headaches, and provide a charm of protection, however much it may do that. The purpose of our faith is to help us stand -- to keep our footing in the heights, and to make something of ourselves in the struggle. It is just not true that adversity is the mark of God's disfavor and prosperity the evidence of His smile.

When the Psalmist went into the sanctuary he was given understanding. He not only felt better, but he was set right in his thinking. He did not merely forget his problem for the time being, but he found a solution to it. The sanctuary of God is not just a place for us to forget our troubles for the time being, but to get an explanation and an understanding of them.

Another thing that the Psalmist learned in the sanctuary of God, that helped him keep his footing and his faith was to look behind appearances and see things as they really were. What had shaken him, he thought, was the unsteadiness of the normal order, the success of the wicked, and the helplessness of God. He came to see that the unsteadiness was in himself, his own near-sightedness, his shortsighted outlook. He said, "I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end." He saw that it wasn't as bad as he thought, that the rule of God was not as shaky as it seemed, and that the prosperity of the wicked was not as solid as it appeared. The normal order was not slipping, but he was. It would steady our feet and help us to remember that.

Appearances are often deceptive; even the facts will surprise you. Huxley said, "You've got to see beyond the facts in order to see the facts." Every moment we are deceived by appearances, by the way things seem. The earth seems to be flat and it isn't; it appears to be stationary, and isn't. It takes a lot of insight and straight thinking to get back of appearances to the way things really are.

In the ethical realm it is always the appearances that get you off track. Sin seems so alluring; like the sparkle of wine in a glass, it promises so much until you see where it ends. It isn't really as glamorous when you get down to the shabby end of it. Force seems so effective to crush your enemy by superior power, until you see where it comes out. These hard-headed, self-assertive ways of getting what you want, beside which goodness, mercy, and patience and the gentler ways of God seem so weak and helpless, are all illusions. They are not so powerfully successful when you get off a little distance and look back. This man said, I saw their end. I saw where they came out.

Of all generations, ours should know what that means. We have seen the end of so many things, where sinners come out, big ones and little ones, when they run up against the will of God. No generation has witnessed so many powerful demonstrations of the futility of force or the dreary end of the wicked. Look at Mussolini hanging by the heels; look at Hitler who seemed so strong, but in a few short years cut down, burned to a crisp in the hot fires of the world's revulsion.

Ibsen tells of the Emperor Julian doing his diabolical best to dethrone the Galilean and bring back the pagan gods of Caesar. But at every step, the author said, he was confronted with the baffling power of Jesus -- "the baffling power of Jesus." Something there is, for all its seeming weakness and apparent indifference, that won't let evil come out right, nor bad seeds come up to good harvest. "Fret not thyself because of evil doers." Don't get too upset about the seeming prosperity of wicked men -- it's short-lived, mostly illusion. They are soon cut off; they destroy themselves; they pierce themselves with their own sword. Trust your deeper instinct. That will get you to where the real truth lies.

Often you have to fight your feelings to keep on God's trail. You can't trust your moods; they will lie to you. You had better disregard them. Your ethical insight is a better guide, your instinctive faith that God is -- that the world is His -- however appearances and moods seem against it. Our feelings are deceptive. A feeling of defeat doesn't mean that you are defeated. A feeling of helplessness doesn't mean that God has forsaken you. Nor do slipping feet mean the ground has given way. God's earth is solid. Put your feet down on it; commit your way to Him; trust your compass; believe your beliefs. They will get you to the trail and will help you, when the dark moods come, to keep your footing in the heights.