

SPRINGS IN LIFE'S DESERTS

"Blessed is the man whose strength is in thee; in whose heart are the ways of them. Who passing through the valley of Baca make it a well; the rain also filleth the pools. Psalm 84:5,6

Most people believe that men and women can be happy. They hold to ideals which they think will make them happy. Some say, "Blessed are the rich." Then, they bend every energy to become rich, hoping that when they do they will be supremely happy. Others say, "Blessed are the honored." Then, they strive to achieve honors, in the hope that when they do they will be perfectly happy. On and on people go following their ideals and striving for happiness. But here the Psalmist says, "Blessed is the man whose strength is in God." He is telling us that "Blessed is the man whose strength is in God," whatever his outward circumstances, whether conditions be peaceful or stormy, whether he be exalted or oppressed, and whether his path be one of ease or struggle.

The happy man is one whose strength is in God. His religion is the greatest factor in his life. God's ways are in his heart. His religion permeates and influences everything else in his life. It is unfortunate for any individual when God does not have the first place in his life. With many a man business occupies the first place in life. From morning until night he lives and moves in his business. All the claims of religion are annulled by the obligations of business. He may be known far and wide as a very shrewd and successful business man, but as a Christian he does not have any reputation either at home or abroad. I have never understood why any man who is a giant in the business world is content to be a Tom Thum in his church life. With others politics is their strong point. Why should one who is successful in political life refuse to give Christ a conspicuous place in his life?

This happy man is one to whom God is a blessed reality. One of the tragedies in our modern life is the lack of the sense of the presence of God. We are aware of the loss of the sense of sin. We know that we are living in an unblushing and shameless age. The most dastardly indecencies are practised in the open with unabashed face and without remorse of conscience. But no man loses the sense of sin until he first loses the sense of God. When a man ceases to live daily in the light of the fact that "Thou God seest me," he will not blush at anything he does.

We look around us and see depressed, low-spirited, discouraged, worried, and faithless people. What is the matter with people anyway? Why are they not stronger, happier, more hopeful? It is because they do not think about God, are not aware of His love, and do not trust in His providence. One of the greatest weaknesses of our age is the loss of the sense of God.

Several years ago I was invited to preach the sermon on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Mentor Baptist Church. To this anniversary and home-coming all of the former pastors were invited, and each was given a place on the program. Among them was Brother B. F. Akers, a faithful servant of God who was then going down the western slopes of life. After he had reminisced and said the thing which God had laid on his heart, in the most touching manner I have heard until this day, he lifted his melodious voice and sang in a way that I shall never forget,

"How tedious and tasteless the hours,
When Jesus no longer I see;
Sweet prospects, sweet birds, and sweet flowers,
Have all lost their sweetness to me.
The midsummer sun shines but dim;
The fields strive in vain to look gay;
But when I am happy in Him,
December's as pleasant as May.

His name yields the richest perfume,
And sweeter than music His voice;
His presence disperses my gloom,
And makes all within me rejoice:
I should, were He always thus nigh,
Have nothing to wish or to fear;
No mortal so happy as I;
My summer would last all the year.

Content with beholding His face,
My all to His pleasure resigned,
No changes of season or place
Would make any change in my mind:
While blest with a sense of His love,
A palace a toy would appear;
And prisons would palaces prove,
If Jesus would dwell with me there.

Dear Lord, if indeed I am Thine,
If Thou art my sun and my song,
Say, why do I languish and pine,
And why are my winters so long?
Oh, drive these dark clouds from my sky;
Thy soul-cheering presence restore;
Or take me unto Thee on high,
Where winter and clouds are no more."

Another thing to notice about the man whose strength is in God is the results of his labors as he passes through the world. "Who passing through the valley of Baca make it a well." He is like the pioneer who blazes a trail, digs wells, founds institutions, builds a civilization, and does thing to make a suitable place for those who are to follow. He is here to convert the valleys of weeping into valleys of rejoicing.

This is not only a psalm for a pilgrim, but it is a psalm of a pilgrim as he makes his journey through life guided and strengthened by the Lord and confident of arriving safely at the Lord's House when the journey of life has been completed. Every Christian is a pilgrim. He does not have an abiding city here. He came into the world in order that he might march through it in haste and arrive in heaven. We are the pilgrims of time, passing, as William Penn said, this way but once.

This Psalm describes the kind of person that all of us ought to be. When a man who trusts God, says the psalmist, and has a real experience with Him, finds himself in a forbidding or ominous place, which may be referred to as the valley of Weeping, he should do more than merely get through it. He should creatively make of it something worth while, namely, a well or place of springs.

To anyone knowing Palestine firsthand, a place of springs has emphatic meaning. In Palestine all life centers around springs. Few and far between, they are still the indispensable prerequisites of life. So, when the psalmist said that a man passing through a disaster area made it a place of springs, he put the matter as strongly as he could. He meant that there are souls who, by God's grace, know how to make the very best out of the very worst.

This very ability is our need now. Many are coming out of such experiences cracked up emotionally, nervously, morally, and the worse for it, while others under such circumstances are learning lessons they never learned before, having strength called out in them that was never called out before, and because they handle this experience in the right way they are wiser and better persons. To which group do you belong? To anyone who closely watches

people in ordinary life, it is very obvious that it is not so much what happens to a man that makes him what he is, as it is the way he takes it and what he does with it. What causes some people to come out worse, and some to come out better from a similar experience? What are the qualities of mind and character that enable a person who is passing through the valley of weeping to make it a place of springs? It is not what a man finds in life that matters most -- he may find a valley of Weeping -- it is what he makes of it that counts. Our admiration instinctively goes out to the person who is mentally and spiritually awakened to see things he never saw before, to learn things he never knew before, and to become something he never was before.

The best description of the valley of Baca seems to be that it was a defile or desolate desert through which some of the tribes had to pass on their journey to Jerusalem for the solemn assemblies.

Every Christian should expect to have his own valley of Baca. Anyone may start his Christian career with bright prospects, but sooner or later he will discover that there are many obstacles in the way. It is certain to lead through confusion and roughness, but he does not have to remain in the valley. We have the greatest admiration for those who took the time and put forth the effort to dig a well and leave some excavated places in which to catch the rain from heaven, while passing through the valley.

We, too, are just passing through. Life itself is transient and temporary. We pass from birth to childhood to youth to maturity to old age to death with amazing swiftness, and so effortlessly that we hardly know in which stage we are. Each day finds us moving from dawn till dark and moving through the mechanics called living. Our mobile society accentuates our transient natures, and we find ourselves constantly on the go. It seems we are always going somewhere, but we never really seem to get anywhere. If there is to be any recovery of purpose and fulfillment, we will have to learn what to do while passing through the deserts.

Faith in God can change every experience in life. The deepest hurts can bring great joy; the heaviest burdens can lift the soul; and the darkest hours can shine with a bright light. A valley of weeping can become a place of springs. For all of us life becomes a valley of Weeping at one time or another. Sickness and suffering come to most of us. Financial reverses or family tragedies may bring bitter tears. Loved ones pass away, and we sorrow. Our fellowship with Christ is closer, richer, and sweeter. And our ability to sympathize with and comfort others is greatly increased.

Whatever the valley of Baca may have meant to the psalmist, it surely stood for a trying and gloomy experience, accompanied with tears. Thus it becomes universal experience, for "into each life some rain must fall and some days must be dark and dreary." Who has not felt the sting of disappointment and sorrow? When a Christian is called upon to pass through the valley, it is well for him to know how tears can be transformed into spiritual refreshment. The gift of the ability to turn a valley of Weeping into one of springs and receive refreshment is an important part of God's supply for every need of a Christian.

This much frequented valley is unpleasant to flesh and blood. Tribulation is not joyous, but grievous. Many rich mercies are received by pilgrims as they pass through the valley. These are not the fruits of the place itself, but they are the gifts of heaven. Few Christians backslide while under the rod of discipline. It is usually when believers are on the lap of luxury that they sin.

We are not exhorted to endure the valley of Weeping. We are not to say that some day we shall be delivered from it, even though that is true. We are not to say, "God helping me, I hope some day to survive you." That is not the program of Christian faith. That is cheap talk in the

light of God's purpose for us. Baca should and can be made a well. It is not so much our experiences in life, as it is our reaction to these experiences that determines whether we are happy or unhappy, strong or weak, helpful or hurtful to our fellow men.

Ever remember that the well you dig will continue to bless those who come after you. The world continues to hurt and bleed and die because of one act in Eden. But it also continues to believe and rejoice and hope because of one act on Calvary. The words of many great men continue to influence men one way or another. Longfellow knew the enduring quality of influence as he wrote:

"I shot an arrow into the air,
It fell to earth I know not where;
For so swiftly it flew, the sight
Could not follow its flight.

I breathed a song into the air,
It fell to earth I knew not where;
For who has sight so swift and strong
That it can follow the flight of a song?

Long, long afterward in an oak,
I found the arrow still unbroke,
And the song from beginning to end
I found again in the heart of a friend."