

MAKING THE BEST OF A BAD SITUATION

"For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting." Titus 1:5.

Crete was a small, populous, luxurious, and corrupt island just off the coast of Greece in the Mediterranean Sea, almost equidistant from Europe, Asia, and Africa. It originally belonged to Greece, but was later taken by the Romans, and it became a Roman colony about seven years before Christ.

Men from Crete were present on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:11). It is probable that a church was organized on Crete immediately after Pentecost. At some unrecorded time, Paul visited this island in the interest of Christianity. We do not know just when he went there, for there is no reference to it in any of his missionary journeys. However, it must have been near the close of his life, because he left Titus there to carry on his work. This island was not at all a desirable place for a Christian to be left. Titus was disappointed greatly with the position as he found it, and was inclined to give way to the mood of despair. Apparently Paul's letter to Titus was in answer to one from the young minister in which he complained of the bad and hard situation which he had on Crete.

Titus was a young man with much zeal, but not a great deal of wisdom; he was full of enthusiasm, but not very well settled in his convictions. He grew tired of the wickedness of the place, of the hardships through which he had to pass, and the lack of appreciation everywhere for him and his work. He was very much dissatisfied with his location. His restless spirit was seeking to flee from these unfavorable conditions.

When he wrote Paul and complained about the hard situation which he had, it is possible that he wrote in somewhat this fashion:

Dear Paul:

This is an awful place. The people are hopeless. The poor, struggling Christian movement is only rags and tatters. I am remaining here until you say "Go," but I can't get away quick enough. For pity's sake, don't make me stay here all winter. There isn't a ghost of a chance for me to accomplish anything worthwhile here.

Obediently but unhappily yours,

Titus.

And then he received this letter from Paul, which said in effect:

Dear Titus:

You are right about the Cretians. A prophet of their own said, "Cretians are always liars, evil beasts, idle gluttons." This testimony is true. Crete is a hard place, and the Cretians are a bad lot. There isn't anything too bad that you can say about them. Crete is in dire need. "For this cause left I thee in Crete."

Paul wrote to remind Titus that these conditions were not new to him; he acknowledged that they were all and more than Titus had stated, but that the wickedness of the situation was the very reason for his remaining there. He had not been left there because it was a lovely place to spend a vacation, nor because the people were so congenial, but because he was so badly needed.

I. Titus Magnified His Difficulties.

1. He encountered real problems.

The difficulties of which Titus complained were real, but they seemed to him sufficient reason for his leaving the place. Why should he waste his life among such people when there were other places where his labors would count for so much more? Who of us has not had just such experiences? Life's work usually leads into uncomfortable situations, into real problems, into difficult places; but the fact that such conditions exist makes the need for help more apparent and more urgent. The existing needs call for the hands of helpfulness, even if hardships are to be endured and sacrifices are to be made.

The tendency to magnify difficulties is due to the fact that we look upon one side of the problem without seeing the other side at all. Men cannot afford to take counsel of their fears; such methods of procedure do not win victories, nor build character, nor lessen the real difficulties. It is well to accept them, and then turn the problem around and look at the other side of it. The very things that would defeat us would also give us the opportunity for a great victory. The very things that discourage us might also greatly encourage us. If the presence of difficult matters leads to hopeless brooding, we shall be defeated; but if it stirs our righteous indignation and fires us with fight and fury, then another chapter must be written. The most serious situation in a man's life is not the presence of difficulties, but what effect they have on his life. They seem to have whipped Titus in the first battle.

2. He was sadly disappointed.

- (1) Because of the enormity of the difficulties.
- (2) Because the people were so unresponsive.
- (3) Because of the small visible results.

3. He indulged in self-pity.

This is a most unfortunate state of mind. It makes one an easy prey to every foe. Such a mind becomes an incubator for all manner of evil things. It makes cowards out of men, it multiplies enemies, it magnifies injuries, it creates imaginary problems, it breaks one's confidence in self, it fills him with suspicion towards every proffered kindness, and it drives him to the wall in defeat.

II. Titus Mastered His Difficulties.

1. By gaining personal confidence.

The trouble with Titus was not the many difficulties but the lack of vision to meet them. His greatest difficulty was within. That is the trouble with most of us. Too many of us give more time to counting our enemies than we do to conquering them. We spend more time analyzing our problems than solving them. The work that lay before Titus could not be accomplished unless it was first seen in the light of great possibilities. Great men do not achieve greatness because there are no hardships in the way, but by enduring and overcoming. Battles are not fought and victories won upon the demerit or upon the weakness of the opponents, but because of the strength of the victors. Twelve spies were sent to investigate the situation in Canaan and bring back report to the Israelites; ten of them told only of giants and difficulties and impossible things, but the remaining two told a different story. They admitted the walled cities, the giants, and the high mountains; but they had a courage to match those things. From what angle do you see your problem, or from what angle do you approach it? Titus did not need more comfortable circumstances nor fewer enemies; his greatest need was more faith and courage in his own heart. Victories must be won first in subjective confidence, then in material realities. Christian faith wins by magnifying its courage and confidence.

2. By cultivating the proper attitude.

Paul's letter to him certainly had a large part in changing his attitude. It sent Titus back to his task with a new spirit. The only way we have of judging the results is by the fact that in recent years explorations and excavations have been made on Crete. They have found the foundations and superstructures of great cathedrals and churches, as if the wicked nation turned to God, as if they heard the preaching of Titus and changed the course of their lives. Whose name is on those churches? Titus! Whose shrines were built there? Titus! Think of it! In the very place from which once he could not soon enough get away! He must have said to himself after receiving that letter, "If this is my field I will cultivate it to the very fence corners. If these rough lives are the stones out of which God expects me to build a mansion, I will polish them with the greatest care." We do not know how he reasoned, but we know that there sprang up in Crete a new and better civilization.

Life in Crete had not been of Titus' choosing. Apart from its isolation, the environment was harsh and depressing. The servants of Christ often find themselves in undesirable places, and in environment was harsh and depressing. The servants of Christ often find themselves in undesirable places, and in environments not of their own choosing. Often they are led along unexpected paths--with a desire to serve in one place, they find themselves limited to another; with the urge to serve yonder, they are compelled to remain where they are. Is it not still true that "the steps of a good man are ordered of the Lord"? "Left in Crete" may spell the frustration of our dreams, but what matters if His purpose is fulfilled? After all, where do we really want to be? It was said of Castilian gentlemen that "they did not choose their tasks, they only chose to do them well," and that is true of the servants of Christ. It is not our business to choose our spheres, but to follow where He leads. He may lead where we do not want to go, but along that pathway we shall come into our service and to our crown.

Titus was called to face a touch and difficult situation, and he shrank from it, but the very things that were distasteful to him were the reasons why he was there. He came to see that the undesirable place in which he found himself was so much raw material out of which something good could be created. A place in which there was so much evil was not a reason for despair, but it was an opportunity for exercising his creative power.

What life hands to us is the raw material out of which something worth while must be created. How challenging are the conditions of our world which call for a power which can transform and renew. When we see this modern Crete in which we live, do we realize that by Christ's help it can be transformed? Give God the chance to exercise His power through you.

3. By learning some things from Paul.

(1) To exercise common sense.

After Titus had walked up and down Crete looking for happiness, Paul led him to see that happiness was not to be found because it must be created. Titus had been left in Crete to use it as so much raw material out of which to make something. After all, life is not what you find; it is what you create. Many people wander from place to place and pick what they can, while looking for life which they never get. What they get is existence. Existence is what you get; life is what you create.

Biography is a running commentary on that. Who, for example, is this Scotch boy who landed in Boston a half century and more ago? He came over by the cheapest means of transportation. His old Scotch father had told him that his abilities were below the average. He began his life in America as a foundryman, and he roomed over a liquor saloon in the north end of Boston. Such was his existence at first. What he made of it, however, was a great life. For he was George A. Gordon, one of the best scholars Harvard ever

graduated, who in Old South Church, Boston, a few years ago celebrated the fortieth anniversary of his pastorate--one of the most notable for intellectual quality and spiritual influence in the annals of American churches,--and who now has fallen on sleep, full of years and honor. His existence was what he found; his life was what he created.

All life must be tackled as Titus did Crete. What existence hands us is the raw material out of which something must be spiritually made. A man who faces life like that needs a soul undergirded by great faith, overarched by high convictions, and blessed with inward power.

(2) To practice Christianity.

There is no use pretending to be a disciple of Jesus Christ if we are unwilling to stay in Crete because it is difficult. Jesus belongs in Crete, not in spite of the fact that the Cretians are liars, beasts, gluttons, but because they are. "This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them," said his enemies.

Suppose Christ had made the same complaint that Titus did. He could have complained to the Father that this world to which He came was a very wicked place, no man regarded Him with honor, or even treated Him with respect. But what would have been the answer of the Father? "That is the very reason you are there." If it had been a good world, if men had been full of faith and righteousness, there would have been less need for His coming; but He came to save the wicked. The thing that made the greatest appeal to Christ was not the goodness of the people but their badness. The reason for His coming to the earth was their sins and not their righteousness.

There is no use pretending to be His disciples if we are dodging Crete. When one lives in this spirit of Jesus, it is more satisfying than anything. Consider: the deepest joy in life is creativeness. To find an undeveloped situation, to see the possibilities, to brood over it, to pray about it, to think about it, to work for it, to get something done there that would not have been done except for your creative soul--that is a satisfaction in comparison with which superficial joys are trivial. The elemental joy is creativeness and when that spirit of creativeness is turned to spiritual ends and helps to transform personalities and societies it is so satisfying that one would not change from it. Titus got started in Crete and thereafter could not have been dragged away.

The same line of reasoning might be applied to:

a. A Foreign Missionary.

He could tell how dreadful the country was, the lack of decency on the part of the people, the filth of their homes, the dreadful living conditions, the lack of respect for holy things, and the danger to life. The Secretary of the Foreign Mission Board would reply, "Yes, you have not overstated the case, but that is the reason you are there, that you might change some of those conditions."

b. A Superintendent of a Hospital.

He could complain to the board of directors that the only people who ever come to his institution are sick people; that he seldom has an opportunity to associate with cultured people and joyful crowds because he is shut up with the cries of the sick, the injured, the invalids; and that on account of the unpleasant surroundings and conditions, he wishes to give up the work. The answer of the directors to him would probably be much as Paul's answer to Titus: "For these very reasons you are there. But for those conditions you would probably not be needed at all."

Life's work leads us most of the time into uncomfortable situations and into difficult places, but the fact that such conditions exist makes the need for help more apparent and more urgent.

Perhaps we have not been sympathetic enough with Titus. Crete was a hard place. The people were so unlovely that it would have been such a relief to his sense of what was fitting to tell them what he thought of them and then leave them.

Most of us face this problem in daily life. You know your Crete; I know mine. And we know that our serious inward problem is somehow to keep Crete from becoming our spiritual enemy and to make it our friend.

That is about the hardest thing that some of us have to do: to take a situation that we dislike or hate, and say: I am not going to let you be my spiritual enemy; you shall not scare me, nor intimidate me, nor embitter me, nor crush me; but, you yet shall be my friend. Happy is the man who so transforms his Crete.

When we are attracted by the newness or strangeness of places; when we fancy that if we were just there we could do great things; let us remember that we cannot run away from difficulties. May we learn the seriousness of our task, and that we are here to change things by the grace of God, Who will help us to live soberly, righteously and godly.

OBEDIENCE

"I said: 'Let me walk in the fields.'
He said: 'No, walk in the town.'
I said: 'There are no flowers there.'
He said: 'No flowers, but a crown.'

"I said: 'But the skies are black;
There is nothing but noise and din.'
And He wept as He sent me back--
'There is more,' He said, 'there is sin.'

"I said: 'But the air is thick,
And fogs are veiling the sun.'
He answered: 'Yet souls are sick,
And souls in the dark undone!'

"I said: 'I shall miss the light
And friends will miss me, they say.'
He answered: 'Choose tonight
If I am to miss you or they.'

"I pleaded for time to be given.
He said: 'Is it hard to decide?
It will not seem so hard in heaven
To have followed the steps of your Guide.'

"I cast one look at the fields,
Then set my face to the town;
He said, 'My child, do you yield?
Will you leave the flowers for the crown?'

"Then into His hand went mine;
And into my heart came He;
And I walk in a light divine,
The path I had feared to see."

--George MacDonald.