

THE USES OF ADVERSITY

(Discourse by F. H. Robison, recorded on page 71 of the 1915 Convention Report.)

Text—“It is good for me that I have been afflicted.” Psalm 119:71.

Introduction and Generalities:

The Master said: “It needs be that offences must come” (Matt. 18:7) and experience has her own confirmatory word. Someone has said: “Prosperity is the blessing of the Old Testament; Adversity is the blessing of the New.” Certain it is that the New Testament writings are full of references to the sufferings of Christ’s followers, and even of himself it is written that “he learned obedience by the things which he suffered,” and “he was made perfect through suffering.” In fact the whole tenor of the New Testament inculcates the principle of resignation under adverse conditions, and more. For the follower of Jesus Christ must not be merely a passive sufferer but a strenuous and persevering combatant against opposing forces.

Troubles and afflictions are intended under the dispensation of Divine grace to bring out the deeper capacities of the heart. Experiences which are calculated to deaden the calloused mind will develop consecration, richness and devotion in the thoughtful.

One time we had a summer hail-storm which beat on the flowers and foliage. A bed of nasturtiums which grew near the door suffered most. When the door was opened the air was full of sweetness from the crushed and mangled vines. They were returning good for evil in the misfortune that had come upon them. For every wound that the hail had made they were giving out the fragrance of a beautiful spirit. Though bruised and broken they were filling the whole atmosphere with an aroma which was in pleasing contrast to the adverse rain of hail. Blest is that life which can yield its sweetest fragrance when the storms are at their highest. We have all known men and women who when lacerated with pain, prostrate under the hands of God, have made their very atmosphere redolent with the incense of Christian hope and trust.

When we reflect on the conditions of discipleship laid down by our Lord we need not be surprised if certain adverse or unpleasant things be our portion. He said: “If any man will be my disciple, let him *deny* himself, and *take up his cross* and follow me.” The very first step of the way is thus seen to be a self-imposed adversity against ourselves, and the narrow way never grows broad and easy. The Apostle Paul, who himself suffered so much of opposition, was comforting instead of discouraging the early church when he told them: “We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.” A Christian without trouble is like a ship that has never weathered a storm; evidences of her

sea-worthiness is lacking. It has not been demonstrated just how much ballast would be necessary to steady her.

Adversity from various sources:

The adversity, opposition, hindrance or resistance brought to bear against our Christian progress derives from five main sources: The Devil, the World, the Flesh, the Brethren, and God.

Of the Devil:

That from the Devil is calculated to be antagonistic in purpose and effect; opposite, hostile and inimical to our best interests. The Apostle Peter describes him in these words: “Your *Adversary*, the Devil, goeth about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour; whom *resist*, steadfast in the faith.” His resistance to our Christian walk is to be met with a still stronger resistance on our part, and that not in our own strength and power, but by the power of faith, inspired and instructed by God’s word.

His method of opposing does not always consist in an endeavor to directly hinder our progress; but since he is a deceiver, he attempts to cause delay by getting us interested in various other schemes and subjects than that most vital to us. Again he is referred to as the “Accuser of the brethren”. False accusations made against the brethren tend to hinder them by arousing their sense of justice. They are obliged to spend time and energy in resisting the desire to recompense the allegation, instead of committing their cause to him who judgeth righteously. We may safely assume that since God has seen fit to allow us to be confronted with opposition from so malignant and crafty a foe He sees some good in it for us, and just that good it is which we wish to experience.

Again Satan’s antagonism drives us to closer fellowship with God for we realize that the devil is wiser and stronger than we. But abiding under the shadow of the Almighty we can say: “If God be for us, who can be against us?” So even Satan who so persistently dogs the steps of the toiling saint, may be a means to a noble end, if we are rightly exercised thereby.

Opposition from the World:

The resistance which the world offers to our progress is from a twofold quarter—from the secular world or from the religious world. The opposition from the world in a general sense consists in its being or acting in a contrary direction, opposed or opposing in position or course.

From the Secular World:

From the secular wing of the world comes a passive opposition, as that of a fixed body which interrupts the passage of a moving body. The world has its ideas and ideals of life and these are said by the Scriptures to lie “in the wicked one.” That is Satan, the wicked

one, rules in the hearts of man by pampering to and nourishing the spirit of selfishness. This spirit of self and the ideals and institutions it has gendered are all firmly set and established in both the mind and heart of the world. When the Lord's people, therefore, travel in an opposite direction they but naturally encounter the inertia represented in the world.

When criticised we are to seek to ascertain to what extent we are really at fault and if we are convinced that it is not our fault then just what lessons God would have us learn in connection with our difficulties with the world. The hauteur and supercilious attitude of the secular world ripens humility and submissiveness in us and helps us to look not at the things that are seen, but at the things that are eternal.

From the Religious Quarter:

Strange as it may seem, from the religious quarter of the world comes a more actively adverse influence. It is active, as in the exertion of force to stop, repel or defeat progress or design. Concerning this adversity the Master said: "Marvel not if the world hate you; ye know that it hated me before it hated you. Ye are not of the world, even as I am not of the world: if ye were of the world the world would love its own, but because ye are not of the world, therefore the world hateth you." It was the Jewish religious world which was especially set against the work of the Master. The Romans and Greeks cared little one way or the other.

But though opposition be our portion from the religious world; though the "sun of persecution ariseth;" (Mark 4:17) though "bonds and afflictions" await us; (Acts 20:23) though we be sent forth "as sheep among wolves"; though "all who will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution"; (2 Tim. 3:12) still we learn by that very method God's protecting care and know that underneath are the everlasting arms. "Though I walk in the midst of trouble, thou wilt revive me." (Psalms 138:7). May it not be true in our case as with the Israelites of old! "The more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew."

Ornithologists assure us that the eagle, the condor of the Andes, the Albatross of the Pacific, and even the swiftly flying little dove, like many other birds that are strong on the wing, can fly more swiftly against the wind than in a gentle breeze. It may be that this is because they are stimulated to exert the muscular strength of their pinions. But, however this may be, it is a fact that the fires of a steamship burn much more fiercely under the boilers when the vessel is going against a head-wind. The Christian's effort of the right kind is at its best when opposition is faced, for this very condition brings us into contact with the Divine resources which are pledged to the help of the Lord's people. "Woe to you when all men speak well of you."

From the flesh:

The resistance which the flesh offers is in the shape of opposing desires, which are contrary to the wishes or to the good of the new creature. “The flesh lusteth against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh; and these two are *contrary* to one to the other.” Through circumstances affecting the flesh we are at times “cast down, but not destroyed.” But such disheartened feeling which arises as likely as not from an insufficient nervous vitality is not without its uses. We are not likely to be proud or unsympathetic while in that condition. And as the Apostle says: “I take pleasure in infirmities, for when I am weak then am I strong.” Trust and submission are learned in a degree otherwise impossible.

Brunts from the brethren:

Yes, our closest friends and associates sometimes hinder us and the courage necessary to oppose these influences is greater than that required against outside forces in that one’s own feelings and the feelings of those held dear are involved. Nor does such action often if ever call forth praise from any one. Even our Master said to Peter: “Thou art an offence unto me, for thou savorest not of the things that be of God, but those that be of men.” (Matt. 16:23)

We are admonished lest “any root of bitterness springing up trouble us and many be defiled.” There must therefore be some way for us to draw benefit from those things which tend of themselves to engender roots of bitterness.

In the first place we may learn humility of an extremely rare quality when we try to make something right and our motives are misunderstood. We go to a brother or sister with whom we have had words and wish to apologize for our part and they are thereby only confirmed in their belief that we were wholly wrong and they were wholly right. Otherwise why should we be coming there to explain anything if we did not now see that they were right. The rebuff to our noble aims thus gained will pretty surely burn out anything of pride that might have been left.

If the brethren speak evil of us (and they sometimes do) we can learn all those qualities which we do not see manifested in such conduct—large-heartedness; benefit of the doubt; is it true? is it necessary? does it minister grace unto the hearer? From the brethren we learn the futility of looking to one another’s faults to grow better. “Comparing ourselves with ourselves we are not wise.” No, it is not by looking, even with sympathetic eye, at the weaknesses of our brethren that we are changed from glory to glory but rather “by beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord.”

Well then, if offences are of such good to the Lord’s people why not turn in and cause others all the difficulties we can. But no: “it needs be that offences must come, but *woe* be to that man by whom the offence cometh.” Not however a woe from us; it is not our affair to recompense evil with evil or hindrance with hindrance. The woes or difficulties

upon those who offend us, as well as upon us if we offend others to their injury, will come from the Lord who can judge and recompense wiser than we know how.

Chastisement from God:

How rich a dowry sorrow gives the soul! God, the great husbandman, sees sometimes best to plow the soil of our hearts with trouble that he may plant the seeds of a richer harvest in the fruits of the holy spirit.

The floods which cover the upper Nile valley in Springtime are welcomed by the natives as affording them the opportunity to sow their seed and to have the soil renewed by moisture and by silt, so that a good crop is possible. The waters of affliction at times overflow on us and one seems to be overwhelmed; the heart is borne down by the flood, all her fruitful land is covered by the waters—waters of desolation, bereavement, affliction. The heart cries: “I am overwhelmed, undone; my life is all wrong; I shall never smile again.” But nay. The flood which terrifies us may only wash away the impurity of the life, giving fertility; the fruits of love, patience, charity shall grow now; it is not a flood of desolation, but of blessing and fruitfulness. “Ye received the word in much affliction.” (1 Thess. 1:6)

Of course, in one sense all adversity is from God in that he allows it to transpire; but some is more directly so than others and in some his hand is more than generally seen. The purpose of such difficulty is never to drive us away from him but to draw us nearer by showing us our weak points and our need of his grace and fellowship. “In the world ye shall have tribulation”—“in me ye shall have peace.” Even of our Lord is written, “He was oppressed and he was afflicted... *the Lord* laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Isa. 53:7).

When affliction is heavy and no one else seems to fully understand, we may be sure of a full appreciation of our little difficulties by Jehovah God, for it is written: “In all their affliction, he was afflicted.” If we incline to think that God does not actually send or arrange for offenses let us read how that Jesus was definitely foretold as being of such a character that he would be an “offense to both the houses of Israel.” (1 Pet. 2:8). Divine wisdom is capable of having arranged such a course for our Redeemer that he could have appeared popular and suave and pleasant to all; but such was not done.

Adversity is the bitter herb with which we eat the message of his grace, lest we become surfeited and vomit forth the whole.

The Master says: “Let not your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me; in my father’s house are many mansions.” Not, “let not your heart be troubled, for you will have a nice, easy and respectable time in the present life.” Rather is the basis for our peace put not in the present but in the future, and this is the word of the Lord through the

Prophet Isaiah: “O thou afflicted, tossed with tempest and not comforted; behold, I will lay thy stones with fair colors and thy foundation with sapphires.” (Isa. 54:11)

Therefore, “Make us glad according to the days wherein thou hast afflicted us and the years wherein we have seen evil.” (Psa. 90:15) “O bless our God, ye people, and make the voice of his praise to be heard; which holdeth our soul in life and suffereth not our feet to be moved. For thou, O God, hast proved us; thou hast tried us as silver is tried. Thou broughtest us into the net; thou laidest affliction upon our loins. Thou hast caused men to ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water; *but thou broughtest us out into a wealthy place.*” Only the experienced child of God can say: “I know, O Lord, that thy judgments are right, and that thou in faithfulness hast afflicted me.” (Psa. 119:75)

Conclusion and Comfort:

The Scriptures tell us of a time when there shall be no more pain. the pain shall have done its work; the permission of evil shall have taught its lesson. Even for us the suffering is not long. “The God of all grace, who hath called you unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have *suffered* a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you.” (1 Peter 5:10) But if this light affliction, which endureth but a moment, be only instrumental in preparing us to heal poor humanity of its head-aches and body-aches of every kind, is it not worthwhile?

Now, though it is not within our power to make affliction no affliction, yet it is in our power to take off the edge of it by a steady view of those joys prepared for us in another state. All the philosophizing imaginable will not make hard things easy, will not make adversity pleasurable in itself. But a proper philosophy on the subject, guided by and based upon God’s word, will enable us to avoid despair and enable us in pious suffering to be calm during the trouble and thus minimize as much as possible, and sometimes entirely counteract the deleterious effects thereof. Trouble, without the aid of the Holy Spirit, means anything but benefit. “Trouble and anguish shall make him [the wicked] afraid; they shall prevail against him as a king ready to the battle.”

“Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of?” Yes, Lord, though it be through fire and blood; by thy grace we will. But the natural man is not able to drink the cup and it would be futile to try. The natural man wants his rights and cries loudly at every infringement thereof. If the trial seems of a peculiar nature or seems more intense than we can bear, let us consider whether or not we are trying to meet it in our own strength.

Yes, it is good to be afflicted, for the winds of adversity fan to greater heat and brighter flame the fire of love already kindled there. Affliction proves and tests our earnestness and burns away hypocrisy and shallow-heartedness. What a terrible mass of hypocrisy and self-seeking would have been attracted to the message of the gospel, did not that

message at the very start promise self-abnegation. Therefore, “count it all joy” and “think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you.” We are forewarned and forearmed more than the worldly, who say: “I shall not be moved, for I shall never be in adversity.” (Prov. 24:10)

If something seems to be incompatible with our understanding of harmony, perhaps it will be all right when we understand the main theme better and perhaps we cannot understand the main theme better until we have had affliction. If others seem to be having an easier time and to be missing the continuous kaleidoscope of perplexities which are our portion, let us remember that they are being prepared for another place, or have had more time, or are not making so much progress, or are adept in hiding their troubles; for every follower of Jesus must walk the way of him who was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

There is a German proverb which says: “Disaster lends to the just a charm, as night a beauty to the stars.” Tenderer and purer than a mother’s kiss come the words “Let not your *heart* be troubled, neither let *it* be afraid.” John 23:10.

“He kindles for my profit, purely,
Affliction’s glowing fiery brand;
For all his heaviest blows are surely
Inflicted by a Master hand.
And so I whisper, ‘as God will’
And in his hottest fire hold still.”

— From the German of Julius Sturm