

The Benefits of Affliction
by
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Note: This sermon was preached on the occasion of the death of Confederate General Philip St. George Cocke at his late residence in Powhatan County, Virginia, on December 28, 1861,

"And Jacob their father said to them, 'You have bereaved me: Joseph is no more, Simeon is no more, and you want to take Benjamin. All these things are against me.' "
(Gen. 42:36)

A series of trying events had befallen the patriarch Jacob. It had not been long since the blood-stained coat of Joseph had been brought to him, when, supposing his son had been rent in pieces by wild beasts, he had exclaimed, "I shall go down into the grave to my son mourning." Now his sons return from Egypt with the dreadful tidings that the lord of the country, under the accusation that they were spies, had cast Simeon into prison and had sworn by the life of Pharaoh that they should not see his face any more unless they brought Benjamin down. This brought from the afflicted patriarch the deep complaint of the text.

The complaint, however, was groundless. The very things that he in his ignorance deplores as against him soon turned out to be greatly for him. Could he have looked beyond the cloud he would have seen Joseph yet alive and lord of Egypt, Simeon under a brother's care, Benjamin going to a brother's arms, and all waiting to receive and bless him in his old age.

From this incident I wish to show that the very things in life that we most desire are generally most detrimental to us, and that the dispensations that we most deprecate are promotive of our real interests.

In our ignorance and unbelief we are greatly deceived as to what is best for us. We congratulate ourselves and friends when we are prospered in life, but could we see the end of these successes we would bewail them as curses. On the other hand we mourn when we and our friends meet with losses and trials, when, if we could look forward and see how they will turn out to our good, we would rejoice and be thankful rather than repine. The lapse of a few years may show us (and if not, the explanations of the final judgment *will*) that the very things we eagerly craved and fondly doted on were but gilded snares, and that the things that caused our hearts to bleed were blessings in disguise.

God often gives temporal good in wrath and takes it away in mercy. Both Scripture and experience show that many are spiritually put forward and upward by being temporarily put backward and downward. All seek health, wealth, and fame. We are pleased when our plans are successful. We are encouraged when our possessions are great, safe, and increasing. We esteem ourselves children of fortune when our families are healthy, our relations agreeable, our friends numerous, and our schemes successful. These are the things that we suppose are for us. It were better for us, according to our judgment, that we should live lives free from pain, losses, and crosses. Give me health, possessions, and friends without the bitters of life. Let me have both

the religion of Christ and worldly prosperity. Let me have all sunshine and no storms, be always triumphant without defeats. Thus would all choose for themselves.

But God, who knows infinitely better than we do what is best for us, has determined otherwise. Prosperity is not necessarily detrimental to piety. If the good things of life were sought from the Lord, held at his disposal and used for his glory, they would be incentives to repentance and gratitude, and the means of greater usefulness. But being sought without any reference to God they become not only hindrances to our higher interests but positively promotive of irreligion.

The main elements of prosperity are honors, riches, and pleasures. These are the things men covet, supposing that they are for them. But according to the teaching of Jesus Christ, they are great hindrances to the salvation of the soul. These are against most men because they induce unmindfulness of God and rebellion against him. They foster pride, self-delusion, earthly-mindedness, and make men unwilling to embrace the Gospel of Christ.

But the afflictions that beset us--such as the disappointment of fond hopes, the loss of property, health, and friends--that we so much deprecate and so hastily pronounce to be against us, are the rough yet salutary safeguards against final ruin. True, they are thorns; but they are the only effectual hedges that a benevolent God can interpose in our way to eternal death. True, these trials take from you some dear worldly objects; but then, under God, they induce you to seek your spiritual and eternal interests, in comparison with which all earthly objects are trifles.

But, says one, "*My afflictions are so peculiar, dark, trying, and subversive of all my hopes. How can they be for my good?*" But under the government of God it is but reasonable to suppose that many things must occur for which we cannot account and which we cannot reconcile with divine goodness and our benefit. Just here is the province of that faith that saves the soul. Though clouds and darkness are found about him, faith realizes that justice and judgment are the habitation of his throne. In the darkest trials the believer hears the voice of God saying, "*Be still. What you know not now you shall know hereafter.*"

But let us indicate some particulars in which the inscrutable, trying providences of God (which we are wont to pronounce as against us) are but links in the chain leading to our greatest benefit and highest happiness.

1. *Afflictions are not against but for us, because they often lead us to seek God when nothing else will.*

So engrossed is man in the things of time that in many cases nothing but the gathering tempest will induce him to flee to God, his great refuge. "*Who is the Lord that I should obey his voice,*" was the impious language of Pharaoh while in affluence, but "*entreat the Lord for me*" was the suppliant language of the same haughty monarch when the judgments of Heaven were thundering around him. While Manasseh was wealthy and healthy and moved in kingly splendor, he grew to be a chieftain in wickedness. But when he was dis-crowned, reduced and imprisoned, he humbled himself, sought the Lord, and the Lord heard him. He now blesses God for the dungeon and not for the throne. In mercy he was ruined temporarily. So long as the Prodigal was in a land of plenty he was contented to remain from his home, but when he began to be in want he arose and returned to his father. Famine drove him home. The Disciples

allowed the Saviour to sleep while they were sailing upon a smooth sea. But when the storm threatened them, they went to him in earnest and prayed, "Master, do you not care that we perish?"

So with most men now. So long as the sea of life is stormless they are contented in unbelief. But when moral storms darken their skies and wreck their hopes, they make for the haven of pardon and peace. There are millions on the Lord's side who, but for afflictions, would be following lying vanities and forsaking the God who made them. There are untold numbers in the churches of Christ adorning their profession, who would be the devotees of mammon but for having their hearts smitten with sorrow. Twice ten millions are singing around the throne in Heaven who would be wailing in penal fires but for having met with losses and crosses on earth. The experience of David is the experience of such: "It is *good* for me that I have been afflicted, that I might learn thy statutes." And if so, are not the tribulations of life for you?

2. Afflictions are not against but for us, because they give us a realizing belief in the existence, government and presence of God.

In times of prosperity we become practical atheists. We believe that Jehovah is the God of the Bible, of the Church, and of Christianity, but have no practical persuasion of his agency in the common events and affairs of life. How shamefully do we ignore God as a nation, as farmers, and as families! In common life we put Him far off in the empyreal heavens, and act as if we were self-created and self-sustained. In this respect we are "without God in the world."

Now the most effectual cure for this crying sin is adversity. When God speaks to us in some trying providence, when he visits in national calamities, when he takes from us health, possessions and friends, then we realize that he is above, around and within us. Oh, how near and realizingly does God come to us in the death of loved ones! In trying and adverse events, whatever may be the rod used we feel that he is the chastiser. If, then, adverse providences induce in us the conviction that by God we are made, sustained, and are soon to be judged, then surely they are among the "all things that work together" for our good.

3. Afflictions are the best means of acquiring an experimental knowledge of sacred things.

The great defect in our religion is that it is too speculative. It slumbers inertly in the mind, exerting but little influence over our emotional nature. We preach, hear, pray, and believe speculatively. The great want [need] of the world is an earnest, heartfelt, experimental religion. How can it be acquired? God has many schools in which to train his children. He teaches them by his Word, his ministry, and ordinances. But these do not impress and move the heart like trials. "Tribulation works patience, and patience experience, and experience hope, and hope makes not ashamed."

It may be well questioned whether one can be an experienced, enlarged Christian without being schooled in fiery trials. The profoundest sense of God's goodness, which it has been my privilege to witness, I have seen in the countenance and heard from the lips of the suffering. We find that none lean on God with such a filial trust as those whom he has afflicted. We doubt, indeed, whether true gratitude and faith ever spring up in the soul till it has been smitten with anguish. The religion of those who have been always prosperous must be superficial and incomplete. But

deep, strong, Christ-like piety strikes root in the soil which has been broken and softened by calamity. And if so, are not troubles promotive of our highest good? Are we not in great moral danger without them?

4. *Afflictions give us a new insight into, and endear unto us, the Scriptures of God.*

There are many portions of God's Word, the meaning of which we can never understand, the beauty of which we can never appreciate, and the preciousness of which we can never realize till we have known adversity. You cannot enter into the feelings of one in distress till you have been similarly tried yourself. Now the Bible was mostly written *by* the afflicted, *for* the afflicted. Indeed, "Had he ne'er with grief been smitten, then David's Psalms had ne'er been written."

We do not overstate the truth when we affirm that the Bible is more the afflicted man's book than the prosperous man's. A vast deal of the Scriptures is written for the comfort of such. Many of the Divine promises demand afflictions as the condition of their fulfilment, and the element wherein alone their full luster can radiate.

Take this one: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the floods, they shall not overflow you. When you pass through the fire, you shall not be burned, neither shall the flames kindle upon you." This is cheering Scripture to all at all times. But oh, how it comes home to the heart of those who are sinking in the deep waters of trouble.

Says Christ: "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." To all classes such a promise is beautiful and encouraging. But to the tried, the bereaved and grief-smitten it is more melodious than the tones of an angel's harp and more soothing than the fanning of a seraph's wings. This one verse has been bathed with the tears of millions who will weep no more.

Take the great doctrine of the immortality of the soul, the resurrection of the dead, and the meeting and recognition of the redeemed in Heaven. To mankind in all conditions, such doctrines are grand, ennobling, and the mightiest restraints to vice and incentives to virtue. But how solacing are such Gospel truths when death sweeps from us dear friends! How the one saying, "Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord," supports the bleeding heart when the red-mouthed grave is about receiving our parents, children, husbands and wives!

Said Luther, "I never knew the meaning of the Bible till I was afflicted." If, then, trials and losses lead us to understand, apply, obey, and prize the Word of God, are they not sent both in love and wisdom? In the highest sense they subserve our eternal good.

5. *Afflictions tend to purify us.*

Before some of the vessels of the temple could be used for sacred purposes they had to be put into the fire. So before we are prepared for the Master's use it is needful that we pass through the furnace of affliction. The human heart, like the soil of the earth, has to be torn up by the plowshare of tribulation before it will produce much fruit of holiness. About the best there cling besetting sins, which greatly mar our religious characters and lessen our moral power.

Now the most effectual means of purging off from believers the remains of pride, covetousness, sloth, malice, and selfishness is the fiery furnace of trouble. Were you to witness a refiner refining gold, you would suppose that the gold itself would be destroyed in the intense heat. So when you see a child of grace under an accumulation of ills, you would suppose he would be crushed. But how improved in piety when they come out of the furnace! How humbled, softened, chastened, enlarged, and crucified to the world!

Who has not been benefited by afflictions? Said David, "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I have kept thy word." Said that man of God, A. W. Clopton, when referring on his dying bed to a sore domestic affliction, "It was as essential to my salvation as the blood of Christ. I would not have died without some such trial for a thousand worlds." When the trial came, he supposed all his hopes were crushed; and yet it was the means of his becoming a Christian, a minister, and an heir of glory. And where and what would some of *you* be but for some sore trouble?

6. *Once more, trials qualify for greater usefulness.*

As the heavens are only gemmed with stars in the night, so the light of Christian example shines most brilliantly in the darkness of sorrow. Nothing so well prepares a minister to preach as a bed of languishing. Even Christ could not be a perfect Saviour, could not enter into all the feelings and exigencies of his people, without suffering. Hence we read of the Captain of our Salvation being made perfect through sufferings--of his being tempted (or afflicted) that he might succor them that are tempted (or afflicted).

Afflictions give us a heart to weep with those who weep. When we are in distress, in vain may we repair for comfort to those who never knew what anguish meant. They will not listen to our tale of woe. But those who have borne the smart themselves will sympathize with and speak a word in season to those who cry, "Pity me, pity me, O ye my friends, for the hand of God has touched me."

I doubt whether any Christian can be extensively useful without having been trained in the school of adversity. There are departments in the vineyard that the untried, prosperous professor cannot enter. God designs all his people to be useful, and hence in some way he chastises and afflicts them all. If the chastisements that our Father inflicts on us are designed to make us more efficient in the great work of converting souls, let us pray with Luther, "Strike on, strike on, O my God."

This excerpt is from *A Sermon on Occasion of the Death of General Philip St. George Cocke* by Cornelius Tyree (Richmond: MacFarlane & Fergusson, 1862). **Note:** The text has not been modified, except that punctuation and KJV-era pronouns and verb forms have been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.