

THE NECESSITY AND ADVANTAGE OF EARLY AFFLICTIONS
by
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*"It is good for a man to bear the yoke in his youth.
Let him sit alone and keep silent, because God has laid it on him."
Lamentations 3:27,28*

The great difference and contrast between the maxims of the world and those which religion proposes is in nothing more observable than in taking the measures of a man's happiness and bliss. The world accounts him a happy man if he enjoys a perpetual calm and sunshine of prosperity, if his pleasant and joyful days are never overcast with any cloud nor his tranquility interrupted by a disastrous accident, and if he is never acquainted with any other change than the new and fresh relish of succeeding pleasures and enjoyments.

But religion has taught us to look upon this as a condition full of danger, much more to be pitied than envied and to be feared than desired. It has taught us to consider afflictions as instances of the divine goodness, as tokens and pledges of God's love, and that these severe dispensations are very necessary and may prove useful and advantageous.

"Bearing the yoke" is an easy and obvious metaphor. It imports the restraint of liberty. Our desires are denied and our own wills cannot be exercised. We can no longer ramble up and down as we please, and we smart and groan under the pressure of the affliction which galls and torments us. And yet such is the yoke which the prophet says is good for a man to bear! A strange doctrine indeed to flesh and blood, and oh how few believe it!

We judge things by their outward appearance and as they affect us at the present moment. We cannot persuade ourselves that there is any good in that which we feel to be troublesome and unpleasant. But if we consult our reason and faith, they will soon bring us to the acknowledgment of this truth: that affliction does not come forth of the dust, neither does trouble spring from the ground. The crosses we meet with are not the effects of blind chance but the results of a wise and unerring providence which knows what is most fit for us, and loves us better than we can love ourselves.

There is no malice or envy in God, whose name and nature is love. He takes no delight in the troubles and miseries of his creatures. He does not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men. It is infinitely unworthy of his wisdom and goodness to please himself by seeing such poor creatures as we are tossed up and down in the world, to behold our anguish and hear our groans. It is our happiness and welfare that he designs in all his dispensations, and he makes choice of the most proper and effectual means for that end. He sees us wandering out of the way, ready to ruin and undo ourselves. He first tests us by means of mild and gentle methods, trying our gratitude with acts of mercy and goodness.

He draws us with the cords of love. But if we cast away these cords, if we abuse his goodness and turn his grace into recklessness, then will he take the rod in his hand and see what severity can do.

The author of Hebrews expresses this most excellently: God chastens us for our profit, that we may be partakers of his holiness. Holiness is the highest perfection and greatest happiness we are capable of. It is a real participation of the divine nature, the image of God drawn on the soul. And all the chastisements we meet with are designed to bring us to this blessed temper, to make us like Christ, and therefore capable of eternal happiness.

This will become more clear if we reflect on the natural temper of our minds and the influence that prosperity or adverse fortune is prone to have upon them.

We are naturally proud and self-conceited. We have a high esteem of ourselves, and would have everybody else value and esteem us too. This disease is very deeply rooted in our corrupt nature. Pride is ordinarily the first sin that reveals itself in the little actions and passions of children -- and many times the last which religion enables us to overcome! And such is the malignity of its nature that it renders us odious and vile both in the sight of God and man.

Pride alone is the source and fountain of almost all the disorders in the world, of all our troubles and of all our sins. And we shall never be truly happy or truly good until we come to think nothing of ourselves, and be content that all the world thinks nothing of us too.

Now there is nothing that has a more natural tendency to foment and heighten this natural corruption than constant prosperity and success. The Psalmist, speaking of the prosperity of the wicked -- who are not in trouble as others nor plagued like other men -- adds this effect: "*Therefore pride compasses them about as a chain*" (Ps. 73:6). But sanctified afflictions contribute to abating and mortifying the pride of our hearts, pricking the swelling abscess so as to make us sensible of our weakness and convincing us of our sins. Afflictions aid us in searching out the offenses by which we have provoked God, and in making us more sensible of the heinousness and malignity of their nature.

Another distemper of our minds is the too great affection we have for the world and worldly things. We are all too apt to set our hearts wholly upon them, to take up our rest and seek our happiness and satisfaction in them. God knows that these may well divert and amuse us for a while, but they can never satisfy or make us happy. Therefore he may find it necessary either to remove our comforts or embitter them to us, in order that we may thereby wean ourselves from the world. Even the few and little comforts of this life, notwithstanding all the troubles and crosses with which they are interwoven, are apt to keep the hearts of good men in too great love of this world. What would become of us if our whole life should be altogether prosperous and content, having no crosses and afflictions intermixed? It is most probable that we should never look beyond worldly

things, but conclude with Peter on the mount of transfiguration, "Lord, it is good for us to be here" (Matt. 17:4). God bestows his mercies to gain our hearts. But when we begin to dote on the gifts and forget the giver, he becomes jealous and takes them away, that he may not have any rival in our affection.

Another bad effect which prosperity is prone to produce is our being forgetful of God and unthankful for his mercies. When second causes answer our expectations and desires, we are seldom inclined to look beyond them. We never regard the fountain till the cisterns begin to fail. This is what made Agur pray against a plentiful fortune -- lest he be full and deny the LORD [Yahweh]. When the weather is fair and the sails are filled, the rough and stubborn mariners are seldom at their devotions. But when the storm rises, the sea begins to swell, and every wave threatens to devour them, then they cry to the Lord in their trouble, on him who alone can deliver them out of their distress. I doubt not that a great many devout persons will acknowledge that it was some affliction or other that first taught them to pray. And as afflictions contribute to make us remember our dependence on God, so also they render us more sensible of our obligations to him and more thankful for his mercies bestowed. We are so dull and insensible that we seldom value any of the divine mercies until we find what it is to lack them.

Once more, prosperity renders us insensible to the miseries and calamities of others. On the other hand, afflictions soften the heart and make it more tender and kindly. The sufferings of others make the deepest impressions upon us when they bring to remembrance our own. This tender and compassionate temper becomes a Christian, whose duty it is to weep with those who weep, and to have as deep a sense and feeling of the griefs of others as he does of his own.

Now let me take note of the season which is mentioned in our text as the fittest in which a man should bear affliction: "It is good for a man to bear the yoke *in his youth.*"

We are all willing to put off the evil day; and if we must needs bear the yoke, we would choose to have it delayed until we are old. We think it sad to have our morning overcast with clouds, to meet with a storm before we have launched well beyond the shore. We are inclined to indulge and applaud children and young folks in their frolics and jovial humors, and tell them they will have time enough for cares and troubles when they grow older. We turn that irony of Solomon's into serious advice: "*Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and . . . walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes*" (Ecc. 11:9).

But the divine wisdom, which knows what is fit for us, does many times make choice of our younger years as the most proper time to accustom us to the bearing of the yoke. And a little consideration will reveal the advantages of this season for suffering afflictions.

First, they are then most necessary. Youth is the time of our life wherein we are in greatest danger to run into wild and extravagant courses. Our blood is hot, our spirits

unstable and giddy. We have too much pride to be governed by others and too little wisdom to govern ourselves. It is then that the yoke is especially needful to tame our wildness and reduce us to a due stability and composure of mind.

Second, youth is the time when afflictions can best be borne. The body is strong and healthy, less apt to be affected with the troubles of the mind. The spirit is stout and vigorous, and will not so easily break and sink under them. Old age is a burden, and we will soon faint under any additional load. The smallest trouble is enough to bring gray hairs down to the grave with sorrow. And therefore, since we must meet with afflictions, it is certainly a favorable circumstance to have them at the time of our life when we are most able to endure them.

Third, the lessons which afflictions teach us are most advantageous when we learn them early. By learning them in our youth, we may have the use of them in the conduct of our later years. An early engagement into the ways of religion is a great blessing, and the means whereby this is to be effected can never begin too soon. Youth is more soft and pliable, evil dispositions are more easily cured before time and habit have hardened us in them. A tree needs little force to bend it when it is young; and there needs less of the rod if the child be brought under discipline in good time.

We proceed now to the particular advantage of affliction mentioned in our text: "***Let him sit alone and keep silent, because God has laid it on him.***"

The words are capable of a twofold interpretation, and both are suited well to the purpose. We may either understand them *literally* of solitude and silence, or we may understand them *metaphorically* of patience and quiet submission. Both are good effects of sanctified and well-improved afflictions. Accordingly, we shall say something about each.

Nature has made us sociable creatures, but corruption has carried this inclination to excess. Most persons think it an intolerable burden to spend any considerable time alone. Though they love themselves beyond measure, yet they cannot endure their own conversation. They would rather hear and discourse of the most indecent and trivial things than be sitting alone and holding their peace. And outward prosperity heightens this humor. When the heart is dilated with joy, it seeks to vent itself in every company. When a man is free of trouble and cares, he thinks of nothing but how to please himself with a variety of diversions and conversations. On the other hand, crosses and afflictions render a man pensive and solitary. They stop the mouth, bind up the tongue, and incline the person to be much alone. Sadness makes his company disagreeable to others, and he finds theirs as little agreeable to him. He sits alone and keeps silence, because God has laid the affliction on him. Thus Jeremiah said, "I did not sit in the assembly of the mockers, nor did I rejoice; I sat alone because of your [Yahweh's] hand" (Jer. 15:17).

Compare now the guilt and biased opinions associated with too much worldly conversation

with the excellent advantages of solitude and retirement brought about by affliction. Is it not a sound conclusion that afflictions are a good thing?

Some might feel that it is a poor commendation of solitude and silence if all it means is that a man is not swearing, lying, scolding, or talking profanely when he is alone; for a man may converse enough with others and keep himself free from these. But we choose now to mention such evils as are usually overlooked but are, nevertheless, hardly avoided.

And first, experience teaches us that much conversation begets a remissness and dissolution of spirit. It slackens and relaxes the best of our minds and disposes us to softness and easy compliance. We find it hard enough at any time to compose our spirits to the seriousness that religion requires. But if we are always in the company of others, it is almost impossible to maintain it. That cheerfulness and complaisance which is judged necessary to render conversation agreeable does easily degenerate into levity and sin when we are more intent on pleasing our friends than our maker.

Second, worldly company and conversation fills our minds with noxious images and fortifies our corrupt notions and opinions of things. Our hearts are naturally too much addicted to the things of the world, and the discourses we hear redouble the temptations by bringing them continually into our thoughts and setting them off to the greatest advantage. When we are alone in a sober temper and take time to reflect, we are sometimes persuaded of the vanity and worthlessness of all those glittering trifles by which the generality of mankind are so sadly bewitched. But when we join in with others and listen to their everyday conversation, when we hear them speak of greatness, riches, and honor with admiration, we quickly forget our more sober and deliberate thoughts and allow ourselves to be carried away with the stream of the common opinion. And though the effects are not sudden and observable, yet the words are making secret and insensible impressions upon us.

Third, our judgment is corrupted concerning the qualities and endowments of the mind. Courage and gallantry, wit and eloquence, and other accomplishments of this nature are magnified and extolled beyond all measure; whereas humility, meekness, devotion, and all those Christian graces which render a soul truly excellent and lovely are spoken of as lowly and contemptible. And though men who prefer the former are not so impudent as to formally make the comparison, their very air and way of speaking about Christian graces sufficiently testifies to their opinion. With what affection and concern will they represent a gallant or learned man! But how indifferently do they speak of the character of a truly good man. And so, in censuring men's failings, they exaggerate the smallest instances of weakness or imprudence, but speak lightly enough of the greatest crimes. Drunkenness and whoredom are mentioned in such terms as express little sense of their heinous nature, tending to lessen the horror we should have of them. Ambition and revenge are rather allowed than condemned. While we engage in worldly conversations and become accustomed to such representations, our judgments are thereby exceedingly corrupted,

and we entertain false and pernicious maxims, all the while exposing ourselves to temptation. And so hard is it to guard ourselves against the contagion that it would be better to sit alone and keep silence.

I shall mention but one more of those evils with which common conversation is attended, and that is the faults and follies of others. If our theme of discourse failed to include this sin of gossip, I fear we would find but little to say. I scarce know any fault whereof good persons are so frequently guilty and so little sensible. Perhaps the things are true and no malicious intent is designed in reporting them. But if we consulted our own hearts and applied the great rule of righteousness, of doing unto others as we would have them do to us, then we should soon be convinced of a great deal more guilt and sinfulness than we care to confess. How ill do we take it to have our own failings thus exposed? And how would we feel if the persons we gossiped about overheard our words, or were informed of them?

He who seriously ponders these points will acknowledge that he who sits alone and keeps silence shuns much guilt and temptation. Those hours misspent in needless visits and idle talk, if rightly improved, might set us a great way forward on our journey to heaven. The more anyone is advanced in piety and goodness, the more will he delight in retirement and receive the more benefit by it. Then it is that the devout soul takes its highest flight in divine contemplation and makes its nearest approach to God. The rule which the Savior gives for our devotion is to enter our closet and shut the door. This is necessary to preserve us from distraction and ostentation.

Little does the world understand those secret and hidden pleasures devout souls feel when they have gotten away from the noise and hurry of the world to contemplate divine perfections. There in silence they admire God's greatness, wisdom, love, and his favors toward them. There they open their hearts, telling him of their griefs and cares, casting the burdens of their souls onto him. It is no surprise if they grow weary of worldly company and affairs and long for the quiet happy hours of communion with God.

But here I wish not to be mistaken, as if I recommended a total and constant retirement, or persuaded men to forsake the world and betake themselves to the deserts. No, certainly. We must not abandon the stations in which God has placed us, nor render ourselves useless to mankind. Solitude can have its own temptations, and we may be sometimes very bad company for ourselves! Abused solitude may whet men's passions and irritate their lusts, prompting them to actions which good company would restrain. Melancholy is often too much nourished by solitude, and discontented thoughts find a kind of perverse pleasure in refusing to be comforted. But all this is to say that good things may be abused. Excess or disorder may turn the most wholesome food into poison. And therefore, though I would not indifferently recommend much solitude for all, yet surely I may say that it were good for most men if they were less in company with others and more alone.

Thus far we have spoken of the *literal*, or proper, sense of sitting alone and keeping silent.

Now we will speak of the *metaphorical* sense of a quiet and patient submission to the will of God, the laying of our hand upon our mouth that no murmuring or expression of discontent escape it. "I was mute, I did not open my mouth, because it was You who did it" (Ps. 39:9), says the Psalmist.

Indeed, when we are under affliction, a modest and unaffected silence is a good way to express our submission to the hand of God. The school of affliction is where the lessons of patience and submission are most commonly learned. Children who are much indulged are the more impatient if they are crossed; and there is too much of the child in us all. The Apostle tells us that tribulation works patience. Habit makes everything more tolerable, and if it pleases God to sanctify the first stroke, the second is received with the greater submission.

The other thing I have to say on this duty is that the advantages of affliction are very great and desirable; that it is indeed very good for a man to have borne the yoke in his youth if he thereby has learned to sit alone and keep silence when the hand of the Lord is upon him. There is nothing more acceptable to God, no object more lovely and amiable in his eyes than a soul thus prostrate before him, entirely resigned to his holy will, and quietly submitting to his severest dispensations. Notwithstanding the smart of affliction, the yoke becomes supportable, the rod itself comforts us, and we find much more delight in suffering the will of God than if he had granted us our own.

A discourse by the Rev. H. Scougal from *The Works of The Rev. H. Scougal, Containing the Life of God in the Soul of Man; with Nine Other Discourses on Important Subjects* (Boston, Stereotyped from the Last London Edition, by Lyman Thurston and Co., 1831. **Note:** This discourse has been condensed and moderately rephrased for clarity.