

TURNING DIFFICULTIES INTO DELIGHTS

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Blessed is the man whose strength is in thee [God] .. who passing through the valley of Baca, make it a well (Ps. 84:5-6).

The author of this psalm is shrouded in mystery. Some theologians believe the poem was written during the reign of Hezekiah, but there is no conclusive evidence to support that theory. The matter is unimportant, for the writer, whoever he might have been, had discovered a great truth. The text may be divided into three parts. (1) The Secret - "The man whose strength is in God"; (2) The Suffering - "who passing through the valley of Baca"; and (3) The Surprise - "make a well."

The experience described here was probably based on the fact that after being rebuked by God, the Children of Israel shed tears of remorse. The historian wrote: "And they called the name of that place, Baca, which meant, The place of weeping" (Judg. 2:45). It was also called Bochim, but it is difficult to decide its exact location. The name was absorbed into the Hebrew language and became an everyday saying. All kinds of trouble became associated with the Valley of Baca, which also referred to mulberry trees which grew in sandy locations where water was hard to find. The commentator Renan says: "This was the last stage of the pilgrimage from Northern Palestine to Jerusalem. Ain el-Haramija is a gloomy, narrow valley where brackish water trickles out of the rocks, and hence, the name Valley of oozing water or valley of tears."

When speaking of this text, Andrew Bonar said: "Israelites going to the Passover made light of the deficient water, for their hearts were set on reaching Jerusalem." Those ancient travelers would have appreciated the words spoken by Paul: "For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18). The people who journeyed from the north were going to their holy city, and although the sky was ominous, the clouds had silver linings. Even the inhospitable terrain could not discourage the pilgrims, for they thought only

80

of what lay ahead. Problems became avenues of blessing when the vale of tears seemed to be transformed into sparkling water.

Other folk might have considered a similar problem and grumbled. The writer of this psalm had already said: "How amiable are thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts! My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the LORD: my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God. Yea, the sparrow hath found an house, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, even thine altars, O LORD of hosts, my King, and my God" (Ps. 84:1-3). Ardent desire will always intensify a man's efforts to reach a goal. This fact is evident throughout the Scriptures.

The Valley Of Difficulty... How Depressing

Job was probably the first man who could have appreciated the saying: "It never rains but what it pours!" There was a day when four messengers of doom shattered whatever happiness he possessed. Each servant informed his master of a terrible calamity which had destroyed his possessions. The first in-

TURNING DIFFICULTIES INTO DELIGHTS

formed him of an attack made by the Sabeans who had stolen Job's oxen and killed their attendants. The second man described the terrifying fire which had fallen from heaven to destroy the sheep and the shepherds. The third spoke of a raid

made by Chaldeans, who had driven away the camels and killed the servants. Finally, the fourth came to relate how Job's children were celebrating in the home of the eldest brother when a hurricane shattered the house and killed his sons and daughters. It may be significant that the survivors did not arrive simultaneously. While one man was making his report the next arrived, until all those frightened men had told their story. Job might easily have said: "It never rains but what it pours.

Then Job arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshiped. And said, Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: The LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed

81

be the name of the LORD. In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly (Job 1 :20-22).

That suffering saint was not aware of the conflict being waged against him by Satan, but he was determined that as he passed through his own personal valley of Baca, he would not dishonor God. The book bearing his name describes the many questions that harassed his mind and the disturbing statements made by friends, but throughout the entire ordeal Job remained unsullied and unshaken. He could have complained that God was unfair, that He had forsaken His servant, but this delightful believer refused to grumble about his circumstances. He transformed his own personal valley of Baca into a refreshing well from which he drew living water. His statement "Though he slay me, yet will I trust him," remains one of the brightest stars in a very dark sky.

The Valley Of Danger... How Deadly
And David said unto Saul, Thy servant kept his father's sheep, and there came a lion, and a bear, and took a lamb out of the flock: And I went Out after him, and smote him, and delivered it out of his mouth: and when he arose against me, I caught him by his beard, and smote him, and slew him. Thy servant slew both the lion and the bear: and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be as one of them, seeing he hath defied the armies of the living God (1 Sam. 17:34-36).

It seems remarkable that when David was confronted by his greatest challenge, he remained serene and undisturbed. He was a youth who led his father's sheep in the fields of Bethlehem and was accustomed to being without human companionship. He possibly charmed angels when he played his flute and perfected his aim when he practiced with his sling-shot. He could not have known that his diligence would return amazing dividends. The stone which would be aimed at the gigantic Philistine had to hit its target; there was no room for failure. Goliath was annoyed, insulted, and ready to demolish his youthful antagonist. He had waited for an opponent to

82

TURNING DIFFICULTIES INTO DELIGHTS

come from the camp of the enemy, and the best they could provide was an arrogant child!

Day after day his thundering challenge was heard, but fear had paralyzed the Israelites. They were ready to surrender when David arrived; he was entering a valley of terror. Everybody was petrified except the lad with the ruddy complexion. When he was given permission to confront the giant, he chose pebbles from a mountain stream, and rolling them in his hands, decided they would be suitable for the approaching task. Then he went to meet the giant who seemed as tall as the trees. When Saul and his captains were trembling, David was entering his valley of Baca. He was unafraid, for he considered Goliath to be a dwarf standing in the presence of the eternal God.

Then said David to the Philistine, Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield: but I come to thee in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou hast defied. This day will the LORD deliver thee into mine hand; and I will smite thee, and take thine head from thee; and I will give the carcasses of the hosts of the Philistines this day unto the fowls of the air, and to the wild beasts of the earth; that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel (1 Sam. 17:45-46).

It was all over; the giant was dead. David had no problem with his sling, but the sword was heavy. He looked at it and with a great effort completed his task. Then, grabbing the severed head by its hair, he held it high to give encouragement to his astounded countrymen. They had witnessed something which would never be forgotten. The boy had turned a valley of shame into a monument of glory. Unfortunately, later in his life, David was challenged by other giants and was not always victorious. Nevertheless, the splendor of that shining hour would never fade. The shepherd boy had discovered a way by which to transform difficulty into delight. His valley of Baca had become a well from which he drew continuing refreshment.

83

That ancient story can be as modern as today. Many people face giants of one sort or another, and the prospect is often terrifying. Friends and family frequently fail to understand the predicament when one's outlook becomes threatening. It is never pleasant to walk through the gloomy valley of Baca, where water has a brackish taste, the view of the sky is restricted, and prayers apparently are unheard. Then days seem to be endless, and progress painfully, slowly. David experienced such grief and probably could be an excellent counselor. He asked, "Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted in me?" He answered his own question, saying, "Hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him for the help of his countenance" (Ps. 42:5).

The Valley Of How Demanding
And they stoned Stephen, [who was] calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep (Acts 7:59-60).

It is natural for men and women to desire longevity, and

TURNING DIFFICULTIES INTO DELIGHTS

unless overwhelmed by pain or devastated by shame, no person wishes to die. Mental illness may upset human reasoning, but it is to be expected that healthy people want to live. Death has always been man's greatest enemy, and every year enormous amounts of money are spent on research, the building of medical facilities, and the training of doctors. Death may come by age, accident, or disease and cannot be permanently prevented. The Bible reveals how certain people endured in their valley of Baca. Luke, the beloved physician of the early church, described the death of the first Christian martyr. Stephen was probably a young man who had no wish to die. He was a convert of promise who assisted the apostles in administering to widows within the church. His great knowledge of the Scripture inspired the sermon delivered to those who sought his death. It appears that his graciousness surpassed his knowledge, for when he was asked to leave his preaching for a less glamorous task, he did not complain. Whether he served in a

84

kitchen or a pulpit, anywhere with Jesus was heaven! This young Christian was the most promising of all the converts and probably that fact disturbed the persecutors who believed their future was being threatened. Stephen was completely fearless when he said:

Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers (Acts 7:51-52).

The accusations made by the young preacher aroused the anger of his audience who "cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul. And they stoned Stephen [who was] calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus receive my spirit. And he kneeled down and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep" (Acts 7:58-60).

Stephen was passing through his valley of gloom, but he seemed unaware of his plight. He saw the heavens opened and the Savior waiting to welcome His devoted follower. The psalmist was correct when he explained that anyone making a

well in a valley of difficulty was a person whose strength was in God. Death was a tunnel leading to a new country. Stephen was about to meet the King of Kings. He did not die; he fell asleep and awakened in a new world. His homegoing was witnessed by another young man who, many years later, wrote: "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" (1 Cor. 15:55). There can never be a shortage of living water, when people know how to make a well in their valley of Baca.

85□

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