

## **BUT WHEN LIFE TUMBLES IN, WHAT THEN?**

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[This was the first sermon preached after my wife's dramatically sudden death. Arthur John (AJ) Gossip, Beechgrove Church in Aberdeen, Scotland, 1927.]

“If thou hast run with the footmen, and they have wearied thee, then how canst thou contend with the horses? And if in the land of peace, wherein thou trustedst, they wearied thee, then how wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan?” Jer. xii. 5

Here is a man who, musing upon the bewilderments of life, has burst into God's presence, hot, angry, stunned by His ordering of things, with a loud babble of clamorous protest. It is unfair, he cries, unfair! And frowningly he looks into the face of the Almighty. It is unfair! And then suddenly he checks himself, and putting this blunt question to it, feels his heart grow very still and very cold. For after all, he asks himself, what is it you have to complain about so far? Nothing that everybody does not share. Only the usual little rubs and frets and ills of life that fall to every one, no more. And if these have broken through your guard, pushed aside your religion, made you so sour and peevish and cross towards God – God help you, what will happen when, sudden as a shell screaming out of the night, some one of the great crashing dispensations bursts in your life, and leaves an emptiness where there had been a home, a tumbled ruin of your ordered ways, a heart so sore you wonder how it holds together? If you have caught your breath, poor fool, when splashing through the shallow waters of some summer brook, how will you fare when Jordan bursts its banks, and rushes, far as the eye can see, one huge, wild swirl of angry waters, and, your feet caught away, half choked, you are tossed nearer and nearer to the roaring of the falls, and over it? Suppose that, to you as to Job, suddenly, out of the blue, there leap dreadful tidings to disaster, would you have the grit to pull yourself together and to face it as he did? “The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away: blessed be the name of the Lord.” Suppose that to you as to Ezekiel, that valiant soul, there comes a day when, with no second's warning, you are given the bleak message: “Son of man, behold I take away the desire of thine eyes at a stroke; yet neither shalt thou weep, nor let the tears run down. So I preached unto the people in the morning: and in the evening my wife died.” Suppose that to you, as to Christ, it became evident that life was not to give what you expected from it, that your dreams were not to be granted, that yours was to be a steep and lonely road, that some tremendous sacrifice was to be asked of you, could you make shift to face it with a shadow of the Master's courage and the Master's calm? For there is no supposing in the matter. To a certainty to you too, in your turn, some day, these things must come.

Yes, unbelievably they come. For years and years you and I go our sunny way and live our happy lives, and the rumours of these terrors are blown to us very faintly as from a world so distant that it seems to have nothing to do with us; and then, to us too, it happens. And when it does, nobody has the right to snivel or whimper as if something unique and inexplicable had befallen him. “Never morning wore to evening but some heart did break” – hearts just as sensitive as yours and mine. But when yours breaks, what then? It is a bit late in the day to be talking about insurance when one's house is ablaze from end to end: and somewhat tardy to be searching for something to bring one through when the test is upon one. And how are you and I, so querulous and easily fretted by the minor worries, to make shift at all in the swelling of Jordan, with the cold of it catching away our breath, and the rush of it plucking at our footing?

Goethe, of course, tells us that all the religions were designed to meet us and to give us help, just there; to enable us to bear the unbearable, to face the impossible, to see through with some kind

of decency and honour what obviously can't be done at all.

But then so many people's religion is a fair-weather affair. A little rain, and it runs and crumbles; a touch of strain, and it snaps. How often out at the front one lay and watched an aeroplane high up in the blue and sunlight, a shimmering, glistening, beautiful thing: and then there came a shot out of a cloud, and it crashed down to earth, a broken mass of twisted metal. And many a one's religion is like that. So long as God's will runs parallel to ours, we follow blithely. But the moment that they cross, or clash, that life grows difficult, that we don't understand, how apt faith is to fail us just when we have most need of it! You remember our Lord's story of the two men who lived in the same village, and went to the same synagogue, and sat in the same pew, listening to the same services: and how one day some kind of gale blew into their lives, a fearsome storm. And in the one case, everything collapsed, and for a moment there were some poor spars tossing upon wild waters, and then, nothing at all. For that unhappy soul had built on sand, and in his day of need, everything was undermined, and vanished. But the other, though he too had to face the emptiness, the loneliness, the pain, came through it all braver and stronger and mellower and nearer God. For he had built upon the rock. Well, what of you and me? We have found it a business to march with the infantry, how will we keep up with the horsemen: if the small ills of life have frayed our faith and temper, what will we do in the roar and the black swirl of Jordan?

That has always been my chief difficulty about preaching. Carlyle, you recall, used to say that the chirpy optimism of Emerson maddened him, Emerson across whose sheltered life no cloud or shadow was allowed to blow. He seemed to me, panted the other, like a man, standing himself well back out of the least touch of the spray, who throws chatty observations on the beauty of the weather to a poor soul battling for his life in huge billows that are buffeting the breath and the life out of him, wrestling with mighty currents that keep sweeping him away. It did not help. And I, too, have had a happy life: and always when I have spoken of the Gospel, and the love of God, and Christ's brave reading of this puzzling life of ours, it has seemed to me that a very easy answer lay ready to anybody's hand who found these hard to credit. Yes, yes, they might well say irritably, if I stood in the sunshine where you are, not doubt I too, could talk like that! But if your path ran over the cold moors, where the winds cut and whistle and pierce to the very bone, if you were set down where I am, I wonder if you would be so absolutely sure? As Shakespeare says, it is not difficult to bear other people's toothache; but when one's own jaw is throbbing, that is another matter.

We will listen to Jesus Christ: for He spoke from the darkness round the Cross. We mayn't understand Him, or agree with Him, or obey Him: but nobody can challenge His right to speak. But you! Wait till you stand in the rushing of Jordan, till to you there has come some fulfilment of that eerie promise, "Behold, your house is left unto you desolate," and what will you say then?

I'll tell you now. I know that we are warned in Job that the most drastic test of faith is not even these tremendous sorrows, but a long purgatory of physical and mental agony. Still, I don't think that any one will challenge my right to speak to-day. And what I have to say is this: when Claverhouse suddenly shot Brown of Priesthill, he turned to the wife and asked, the callous brute, "What think you now of your braw guidman?" And she, gathering together the scattered brain, made answer, "I aye thought muckle of him, but I think more of him now." I aye thought muckle of the Christian faith; but I think more of it now, far more. I have never claimed to understand many things in this perplexing life of ours, have always held that my dear master Browning went by much too far when he said confidently that for a Christian man there are no problems in the world or out of it. Surely the acknowledgment of God's love raises new problems. If love, then why and why and why and why? To me the essence of the faith has always seemed a certain intrepidity of loyalty that can believe undauntedly in the dark, and that

still trusts God unshaken even when the evidence looks fairly damning. Do you think Christ always understood or found it easy? There was a day when He took God's will for Him into His hand, and turned it round, and looked at it. And, "is this what You ask of Me?" He said; and for a moment His eyes looked almost incredulous. Aye and another day when, puzzled and uncertain, he cried out, "But is this really what You mean that I should give You, this here, this now?" Yes, and another still, when the cold rushing waters roared in a raging torrent through His soul: yet He would not turn back, fought His way to the farther bank, died still believing in the God who seemed to have deserted Him. And that is why He is given a name that is above every name.

I do not understand this life of ours. But still less can I comprehend how people in trouble and loss and bereavement can fling away peevishly from the Christian faith. In God's name, fling to what? Have we not lost enough without losing that too? If Christ is right – if, as He says, there are somehow, hidden away from our eyes as yet, still there, wisdom and planning and kindness and love in these dark dispensations – then we can see them through. But if Christ was wrong, and all that is not so; if God set His foot on my home crudely, heedlessly, blunderingly, blindly, as I unawares might tread upon some insect in my path, have I not the right to be angry and sore? If Christ was right, and immortality and the dear hopes of which He speaks do really lie a little way ahead, we can manage to make our way to them. But if it is not so, if it is all over, if there is nothing more, how dark the darkness grows! You people in the sunshine may believe the faith, but we in the shadow must believe it. We have nothing else.

Further, there is a grave saying in Scripture, "Receive not the grace of God in vain." That Christ should die on our behalf, that God should lavish His kindness on us, and that nothing should come of it, how terrible! And were it not pitiful if we receive the discipline of life in vain: have all the suffering of it, pay down the price in full, yet miss what it was sent to teach! I know that at first great sorrow is just stunned, that the sore heart is too numbed to feel anything, even God's hand. When his wife died, Rossetti tells us, he passed through all that tremendous time with a mind absolutely blank, learned nothing, saw nothing, felt nothing; so that, looking back, all he could say was that, sitting in a wood with his head in his hands, somehow it was photographed permanently on his passive mind that a certain wild flower has three petals. That was all. But by and by the gale dies down, and the moon rises, and throws a lane of gold to us across the blackness and the heaving of the tumbling waters. After all it is not in the day, but in the night, that star rises after star, and constellation follows constellation, and the immensity of this bewildering universe looms up before our staggered minds. And it is in the dark that the faith becomes biggest and bravest, that its wonder grows yet more and more. "Grace," said Samuel Rutherford, "grows best in winter." And already some things have become very clear to me.

This to begin, that the faith works, fulfils itself, is real; and that its most audacious promises are true. Always we must try to remember that the glorious assertions of the Scriptures are not mere suppositions and guesses. There is no perhaps about them. These splendid truths are flowers that human hands like ours plucked in the gardens of their actual experience. Why is the prophet so sure that as one whom his mother comforts so will God comfort all hurt things? How did the Psalmist know that those who are broken in their hearts and grieved in their minds God heals? Because, of course, it had happened to them, because they had themselves in their dark days felt his unfailing helpfulness and tenderness and the touch of wonderfully gentle hands. And it is true. When we are cast into some burning fiery furnace seven times heated, we are not alone, never alone; but there is One beside us, like unto the Son of God. When our feet slip upon the slimy stones in the swelling of Jordan, a hand leaps out and catches us and steadies us. "I will not leave you comfortless," said Christ. Nor does He. There is a Presence with us, a Comforter, a Fortifier who does strengthen, does uphold, does bring us through somehow from hour to hour and day to day. Pusey once wrote that when his wife died, he felt "as if the rushing

waters were up to my chin; but underneath the chin there is a hand, supporting it.” And that hand is there. And as the days go by, what grows upon one more and more is the amazing tenderness of God. Like as a father pitieth his children, mused a psalmist long ago. I have been wondering these days whether he too, poor soul, had suddenly, without one second’s warning, to tell his children that their mother was dead, and that remembrance of that agony made him sure all his days it is not willingly that God afflicts and grieves us children of men. Anyhow that is true.

There is a marvelous picture in the national Gallery. Christ hangs upon the cross in a dense darkness; and at first that is all one sees. But, as one peers into the background, gradually there stands out another form, God’s form; and other hands supporting Christ, God’s hands; and another face, God’s face, more full of agony even than our Saviour’s own. The presence, the sufficiency, the sympathy of God, these things grow very real and very sure and very wonderful.

Further, one becomes certain about immortality. You think that you believe in that. But wait till you have lowered your dearest into an open grave, and you will know what believing it means. I have always gazed up at Paul in staggered admiration when he burst out at the grave’s mouth into his scornful challenge, his exultant ridicule of it, “O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?” But now it does not seem to me such a tremendous feat: for I have felt that very same. True, I can tell him where death’s sting lies. Ah! it is the constant missing of what used to be always here; the bitter grudging every second of the dear body to the senseless earth, the terrible insecurity, for one is never safe – anything, nothing, and the old overwhelming pain comes rushing back. Yet when the other day I took up a magazine, it was with amazement I discovered they are still chattering about whether we people are immortal or not. I am past that. I know. “I believe in the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.”

But there is one thing I should like to say which I have never dared to say before, not feeling that I had the right. We Christian people in the mass are entirely unchristian in our thoughts of death. We have our eyes wrongly focused. We are selfish, and self-centered, and self-absorbed. We keep thinking aggrievedly of what it means to us. And that is wrong, all wrong. In the New Testament you hear very little of the families with that aching gap, huddled together in their desolate little home in some back street; but a great deal about the saints in glory, and the sunshine, and the singing, and the splendour yonder. And, surely, that is where our thoughts should dwell. I for one want no melancholious tunes, no grey and sobbing words, but brave hymns telling of their victory. Dante had a sour mind. Yet, as he went up the hill that cleanses him that climbs, suddenly it shook and reeled beneath him. What’s that? he cried out in alarm. And his guide smiled. Some happy soul, he said, has burst through into victory, and every other on the mount is so praising God for that, that the whole hill rocks and staggers. And is not that the mood that best becomes us? Think out your brooding. What exactly does it mean? Would you pluck the diadem from their brows again? Would you snatch the palms of victory out of their hands? Dare you compare the clumsy nothings our poor blundering love can give them here with what they must have yonder where Christ Himself has met them, and has heaped on them who can think out what happiness and glory? I love to picture it. How, shyly, amazed, half protesting, she who never thought of self was led into the splendour of her glory. As the old poet put it centuries ago,

“Our sweet is mixed with bitter gall,  
Our pleasure is but pain,  
Our joys scarce last the looking on,  
Our sorrows still remain.

But there they have such rare delights,  
Such pleasure and such play,  
That unto them a thousand years  
Doth seem but yesterday."

To us it will be long and lonesome: but they won't even have looked round them before we burst in. In any case, are we to let our dearest be wrenched out of our hands by force? Or, seeing that it has to be, will we not give them willingly and proudly, looking God in the eyes, and telling Him that we prefer our loneliness rather than that they should miss one tittle of their rights. When the blow fell, that was the one and only thought that kept beating like a hammer in my brain. I felt I had lost her for ever, must have lost her, that to all eternity she must shine far ahead of me; and my heart kept crying out, "I choose it, I choose it. Do not for my sake deny her anything." I know now that I have not lost her. For love is not a passing thing one leaves behind. And is it not love's way to stoop?

And, after all, thank God, our gift is not an absolute one. When we are young, heaven is a vague and nebulous and shadowy place. But as our friends gather there, more and more it gains body and vividness and homeliness. And when our dearest have passed yonder, how real and evident it grows, and near it is, how often we steal yonder. For, as the Master put it: Where our treasure is, there will our heart be also. Never again will I give out that stupid lie, "There is a happy land, far, far away." It is not far. They are quite near. And the communion of the saints is a tremendous and most blessed fact.

Nowadays, for example, to pray is to turn home. For then they run to meet us, draw us with their dear familiar hands into the Presence, stand quite close to us the whole time we are there – quite close, while we are there.

And for the rest, many poets have told us the Lethe, the river of forgetfulness. But Dante, in his journeyings, came on another, the Eunoe, to taste the sunny waters of which is to have recalled gladsome and glorious and perfect things one has ever experienced. Eunoe runs beside the track all through the valley of the shadow; and a wise soul will often kneel, and lift a handful of its waters to his thirsty lips, and, ere he rises, wonderingly thank God for the splendour he has known, that never would and could have been at all but for His marvelous grace. And so back to life again, like a healthy-minded laddie at some boarding-school, who, after the first hour of home-sickness, resolves, if he is wise, he will not mope, but throw himself into the life about him, and do his part and play the game, and enjoy every minute of it, - aye, and does it too – though always, always his eyes look ahead for the term's end, and always, always his heart thrills and quickens at the thought of that wonderful day when he will have not memories and letters only, but the whole of his dear ones really there, when he will be with them again and they with him. Well, that will come in time. Meanwhile, "Danton, no weakness," as that brave soul kept muttering to himself on his way to the guillotine, and he showed none.

I don't think you need be afraid of life. Our hearts are very frail; and there are places where the road is very steep and very lonely. But we have a wonderful God. And as Paul puts it, what can separate us from His love? And as death, he says immediately, pushing that aside at once as the most obvious of all impossibilities.

No, not death. For, standing in the roaring of the Jordan, cold to the heart with its dreadful chill, and very conscious of the terror of its rushing, I too, like Hopeful, can call back to you who one

day in your turn will have to cross it, “Be of good cheer, my brother, for I feel the bottom, and it is sound.”