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FAITH IN THE MIDST OF TRIAL

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God Makes a Difference

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OH, FOR A FAITH THAT WILL NOT SHRINK

Oh, for a faith that will not shrink,
Tho' pressed by every foe,
That will not tremble on the brink
Of any earthly woe;

That will not murmur nor complain
Beneath the chast'ning rod
But, in the hour of grief or pain,
Will lean upon its God;

A faith that shines more bright and clear
When tempests rage without;
That when in danger knows no fear,
In darkness feels no doubt.

Lord, give us such a faith as this;
And then, whate'er may come,
We'll taste, e'en here, the hallowed bliss
Of an eternal home.

-- William H. Bathurst

* * * * *

01 -- FAITH IN THE MIDST OF TRIAL

God's number one apostle of the first century Church was in jail. If there was any one man of that day who seemed indispensable to the Church, it was this pioneer, Paul. Yet from behind bars he sent word to the young church in Philippi, declaring, "This shall turn to my salvation through your prayer, and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:19).

Of course, Paul knew that God could get him out of jail; God had done it before. In fact, He had done it in the very city, Philippi, where dwelt the believers Paul was now addressing. That other time God had sent an earthquake that shook the prison posts, set all prisoners free, and filled the poor jailer with such consternation that he nearly committed suicide at the prospect of losing all his charges. Instead, with the help of Paul and Silas, he was converted and baptized; also his whole household.

No doubt Paul knew about the time when the angel of the Lord came down and opened the prison doors for Peter and John. Surely God could do it again.

But now Paul was languishing in jail. No earthquake now; no angel! Rome held him, and the bonds were real. Trouble was piling up, and no relief was in sight.

How wonderful it is to believe God when He sends the needed answer right away and the jail is opened! But more wonderful it is to believe God when the gates are still locked. It is just as necessary to believe in the divine omniscience as in the divine omnipotence. His judgment must be trusted as well as His power. Sometimes the answer does not come when we are looking for it. When Elijah prayed down fire on Mount Carmel, his prayer was short and the descent of fire swift. But when he prayed for rain, he agonized on his face in prayer and sent out his servant seven times before the cloud appeared, no larger than a man's hand.

Looking at his situation in jail, Paul refused to be classified as a prisoner of Rome; he described his bonds as being "in Christ." It was for his Lord Jesus Christ that he was in jail. That made a difference. Also, Paul transformed the prison into a place of witness for his Lord. He testifies: "So that my bonds in Christ are manifest in all the palace, and in all other places."

The effect on the Church, Paul seems to claim, was beneficial. "And many of the brethren in the Lord, waxing confident by my bonds, are much more bold to speak the word without fear." Perhaps it was better that he should be in jail, he seems to suggest, for many of the timid ones were now witnessing fearlessly. He explains: "But I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel." This promotion of the gospel was his life aim; his own comfort and freedom were altogether secondary.

Also, while in jail, Paul was having trouble within the church. Evil things were being done in the name of religion. Some were preaching a Christ "of contention," "even of envy and strife." Paul sensed their insincerity. Opposing him, they were intent on piling on the agony, and adding affliction to his bonds. I have heard churchmen of this day declare that they could withstand opposition from the world but could not endure trouble within the church. Paul had to suffer both. However, he did not dwell on the cynical aspects of his situation. He wrested from it some good. He pointed out quickly that, while "some indeed preach Christ even of envy and strife," there were "some also of good will." He insisted that, while some were insincere, there were others motivated by love, knowing that he was "set for the defence of the gospel." He seems to let his mind dwell on the good people. He concludes with rare insight, "What then? notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice." Paul refused to be submerged by insincere, contentious religionists. He chose rather to look at the genuine Christians and rejoice in the preaching of Christ, his Lord and Master.

What is the secret of this faith which remains radiant in the midst of agonizing perplexities and adversities? What makes this man in jail so sure that things are going to change for the better? I am satisfied that the foundation for it all is an unswerving confidence in God. He is the basis for Paul's hope for the future, which enables him to declare: "According to my earnest expectation and my hope, that in nothing I shall be ashamed."

Fenelon wrote in his day, "You can't treat God with too much confidence." He felt that God can never be overrated. One of the church fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries wrote in substance, "God is most nearly like the best that I can think of." My Christian faith does not hesitate to put it stronger than that: "God is far better than the best that I can think of." He exceeds my fondest dreams and deepest needs. Blessed be God! He is never at His wit's end or in a corner.

In the same vein Tertullian wrote about Jesus, "They should have known He was God: His patience should have proved it to them." This patience speaks of power and not of weakness. I have read and heard of men who have challenged God and defied Him by trying to reduce Him to our man-made concepts. But His ways and thoughts are higher than ours, even as the heavens are higher than the earth. I read of one who stood on a public platform and challenged God to prove His identity by coming down and striking him dead within ten minutes or so. But he lived! If I had been God and a man had dared me like that, I might have killed him in less than thirty seconds! But

would such a thought prove any claim of mine to essential deity? I think not. Peter warned us long ago, "The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance."

To Paul, however, this confidence in God must be demonstrated in an everyday courage. This courage must be practical. It filled Paul "with all boldness." He was so sure of God he was willing to risk something for Him. His faith did not demand immunity from trial: rather, it demonstrated itself in the midst of trial. His comfort was in the area of divine enabling rather than in providential coddling. Someone has reminded us that God not only tempers the wind to the shorn lamb; He also grows wool on its back, so it can face the wind. Too many times I have used up my prayers in petitioning God to change the weather or the circumstances of my life, when I should have been asking Him to let the "wool" on me grow a little faster. I have asked God to perform miracles for me, when He would have made a miracle out of me if I had dared to trust Him. I have even discovered that much of my praying was given over to offering God a generous supply of unsolicited advice. I told God what I wanted and even hinted how He might do it for me. Frequently, with strong urgings based on an emergency, I have told Him when to do things for me.

When I was visiting the British Isles in 1950, after an absence of thirty-four years, I was impressed with the size of the English sheep as they grazed in those delightfully green fields. Later on, while visiting with a cousin in northern Ireland, I examined some thoroughbred sheep more closely and discovered that they were not so large after all. They just carried a very heavy coat of wool. The cool weather and delightful pastures make for a good coat of wool. I have wondered if some of the inclement weather in life's circumstances, plus the green pastures of God's Word, do not afford a counterpart in the development of a healthy soul. Moral strength comes only in answer to a courageous facing of the winds of adversity. Let faith in God prevail; He will help us stand the storm.

Another earmark of Paul's faith that made adversity his servant rather than his master was his constancy. He is dogmatic in the assertion, "As always, so now also Christ shall be magnified in my body." He had learned that faith had to be applied to each new situation if he would be thoroughly Christian. His commitment was timely because it was timeless. He knew that the "eternal yes" had to include the "daily yes." I knew of one Christian who was described by those who knew him best as a "whiz-bang." He was a "whiz" for a while, ran well; but when trials came, he "blew up," [and then] he was a "bang." This is where Christianity is finally put to the test, in the strain of daily living, when the pressure is on. To be genuine, faith must be good for the commonplace as well as for the crisis. The validity of the crisis is verified in the daily routine.

Paul was sure that the distressing circumstances of his life would change -- "this shall turn" -- because he had settled it that God would not change and that he himself would not alter his outlook of steadfast trust in God. "As always, so now also." Only one thing was left to be changed then, and that was the jail term. It had to end.

As we probe Paul's faith in its Biblical context, we discover there is a commitment that he has made that is bottomless. "Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life, or by death." The reservations are all gone. There is nothing more to give, only new implications of what

was committed in the grand crisis. Paul had learned that there is no true holiness without faith, and that faith is not full until a complete commitment has been made. All of us need to learn this lesson, even though our active assignment may not put us in the role of apostle or martyr. Significant commitment is always costly, for there are no bargains in this area of life. For Paul the commitment was irrevocable, for he renewed it by facing the fresh implications day by day. The world says, "Every man has his price," but here was a man who could not be bought by adversity because he had made the supreme commitment.

With such a commitment, he also received a commission. Paul expressed it, "For to me to live is Christ." His own life in the right sense was an extension of his Master's incarnation. His assignment was to do His will and deliver His message. He discovered that a consecration that meant something to him also meant something for God. He felt himself to be one of the most deeply obligated beings in the community, and he meant to do something about it.

How easy it is to limit this kind of radiant living to a special few who have a genius for it! But actually it is the divine norm for every one of us. All of us may pray like Jesus, "And all mine are thine," and then take hold of the counterpart, "and thine are mine." When we give God our "little all," He places at our disposal His limitless resources. What a partnership!

Finally, this jail term had a way of showing Paul the real issues of life. He grasped the significance of its consummation. He saw some things extra clearly through those prison bars. He felt that the intent of his enemies was actually to put him to death, but he faced that monster too and came away unafraid. He concluded with the serenity of a philosopher, "To die is gain." He looked death in the face and observed that to be "absent from the body" meant to be "present with the Lord." Death was not simply a separation for him; it was an abiding union. Life was not a terminus; it was a gateway. It was not an anticlimax to be dreaded; it was the beginning of a better day to which all Christians might look forward. When confronted with the alternatives of life and death in an ultimate sense, Paul chose "to be with Christ; which is far better."

Again, however, the issue of personal happiness or choice is not the controlling issue. He faces the needs of the young churches and decides his duty is to stay. His spiritual intuition tells him that God is going to let him remain a while longer. "And having this confidence, I know that I shall abide and continue with you all for your furtherance and joy of faith; that your rejoicing may be more abundant in Jesus Christ for me by my coming to you again."

What an incurable optimist, this man of faith! Why imprison him when he could not be bound? Something within him could not be chained; it remained forever free. His faith in the ultimate triumph of God and of good made him to know no defeat. Even in the midst of prolonged and severe trials he could be cheerful, because what he was living for was victorious now and would be finally enthroned. While he was bound in jail, he reveled in the timid Christians who had shown their mettle when put to the test by the loss of their missionary superintendent. Even this undesirable jail experience he saw was working out for the "furtherance of the gospel." The Christian witness was running through Caesar's court and into many faraway key places. Even the hypocrites within the church could not get him down. Their quagmire of bad spirit and improper motives is to be avoided, and the note of praise is to be heard because the message of his

incomparable Christ is preached. Why kill a man like this? You are only thereby giving him what he wants. He is ready to go, and personally actually prefers to go.

But what of our own day? May we have this faith in the midst of trial? Is God the same today? Or is He a respecter of persons? I believe the same miracle of grace may happen again in you and me in this twentieth century. Faith was made for an age of alphabet bombs. It suits hot wars and cold wars. It works when our prayers are answered speedily, but it works for the long delays, too. I believe that faith can triumph today in that undesirable event or loss in your life or mine. We, too, may declare, "For I know that this shall turn to my salvation through your prayer, and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ." Will we dare to put our trust in Him with a holy recklessness? He can't be oversold. Will we have the courage of our faith when trouble comes? Will our commitment be bottomless and constant? Will we dare to accept orders and assignments that cost us something, and when the end comes will we see clearly and steadfastly that the things that we have lived for are trustworthy? Is our hope in God today -- and always?

I will trust Him and not be afraid.

* * * * *

02 -- FAITH WHEN GOD IS SILENT

The silences of God are frequently occasions for the human heart to fear. Trouble comes uninvited and sometimes in unexpected proportions. Even the ways of God as evidenced in His providences seem past finding out. Tragedy, pain, and loss strike the good and bad alike. In the agony of our distress and in our search for meaning we often cry out, "Why?" Then when the silence of God is prolonged, our soul cry becomes, "How long?"

But Jesus himself reminds us in His parting words, spoken so tenderly to His own, that the silences of God are on the side of faith and not doubt: "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you." There is no deception in God's silence; it is not to fool us. There is no weakness because He does not speak; it is not to hide His ignorance. He knows life's answers, and He holds the key to our riddle. However, God is not inclined to skywriting to answer every moan. He has spoken the final word by His Son, and the supreme answer to our deepest questions is to be found in His cross. Christ's triumphant resurrection thunders assurance that the purposes of God for us are steadfast and reliable. Even the home of God is to be our final home, and it has abundant dwelling places. These are not surprises; they are the inevitable for such a working and planning God.

All of these promises my heart claims today in the simplicity of faith, for I pray in Jesus' worthy name. Even now I will rejoice although His immediate purpose is hidden from my view. I know He would not deny me by default; neither would He deceive me by His silence.

I heard a big Texas rancher declare in his testimony one day that when he reached heaven he expected to have the biggest ranch and the largest group of fine white-faced cattle of his career. Some years ago I heard a weary grandmother declare that she was going to rock for a year or two when she got to heaven. I am not sure that either of these was wrong, for I am confident that God

will make us at home in His home and that it will exceed our fondest dreams. I am sure that I, too, shall be satisfied when I awake in His likeness. The unexpected and the unrevealed have no terrors for me, for my heart is fixed. The strength of His wisdom is on my side, and His love overwhelms the silence of today. I believe God.

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03 -- FAITH IN A PERSON

The Christian's assurance concerning divine certainties lies not in a code; not even in a formal creed. It lies in a simple, living faith in the true character and person of God himself. Because God is who He is, we can rely upon Him. He cannot lie and He cannot fail. He loves us with an everlasting love; therefore we will trust Him.

Abraham, the pioneer of faith, went out in his day not knowing where he went. But he knew who had sent him -- the eternal God. The man of faith went forward without detailed blueprints in his hands, for they were in the mind of his God.

Life itself brings shattering experiences to us all, experiences that have a way of leading us to the foundations that abide. The providences of God often upset our schematic views. In an ancient day Job felt the blows of disaster in rapid-fire succession -- resources taken away suddenly, loved ones snatched away by death, and berating and betrayal by false friends and a fickle wife. But he hung on in faith, declaring, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him." Even in the darkest hour, when God seemed to elude him, he insisted, "But he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold."

Our light is clearer and brighter than that of either of these patriarchs, but the terrors of comparable soul-shaking experiences are ours in this atomic age. Also, we have the added light and reassurance of Calvary's message and deliverance. Its message declares that "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself." Our deliverance is here and now, for the promise is that we may be "more than conquerors" through Him that loved us. "He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32.)

My faith today is in such a personal God. I will trust Him where I cannot see.

Fear not, I am with thee,
Oh, be not dismayed,
For I am thy God,
I will still give thee aid;
I'll strengthen thee, help thee,
And cause thee to stand,
Upheld by My gracious,
Omnipotent hand.

* * * * *

04 -- FAITH TO HOLD ON

O God, our Father, we seek Thy face today, in the noontime of life when the pressure is on. We know that Thou art good, but teach us again what it means to put our trust in Thee. When we cannot see, help us to rely on Thy sight and wisdom. The happenings of today are too much for us. Our inadequacy is poignant and real. We acknowledge our present need and seek Thy help. Our own cheerfulness will not do; it is about to run out.

Thou dost know how readily we seek the why of these unexpected events, and how eagerly we seek for good in the midst of evil. We are nearing the place of confusion in all of our searching. But we come directly to Thee, the Giver of every good and perfect gift. Take from us this feverishness and give us the serenity of faith. We know that Thou art still the moral Ruler of our universe, but things seem to have gone wild today. The seemingly unbearable has become our portion. Sanctify even these undesirable experiences to our good, for we are committed to Thy holy will. Thy Son was crucified on a cross, but with it Thou hast moved the world. Teach us the inner meaning of that Cross, so that with Him we may "die daily" and not complain.

Our heart's cry is that Thou wilt remove from us the bitterness of this loss. The pain seems too prolonged and intense. We have sought to find the answer in our own past, but our explanations do not satisfy. Our will is ours, but we make it Thine. If this hurt must remain, be pleased to give us strength. Our supply is exhausted. We have testified to the world that God makes a difference in men's lives. Now help us to demonstrate that truth in this hour of trial. We know that in all things Thou art altogether reliable and that Thy purposes do not fail. Let Thy will be done in us today as it is done in heaven. Our faith lays hold of Thy promises. Make them fresh and new this very hour. Help us to stand on them and not fear.

Show us Thy face, and all is well again. Our faith holds on. In our bewilderment, do not let us miss the way. We ask not for detailed instructions. Only let Thy light shine on our path and show us the right direction. Then give us strength to take that way with courage. Our faith still clings to Calvary for all that we need. We trust Thee now. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Keep holding on; no hand but thine
Can break thy hold on Christ divine.
Keep holding on and Christ to thee
Will send at last the victory.

* * * * *

THE END