

Purpose in suffering

On November 16, 1997, the NFL Indianapolis Colts who were 0 and 10 on the season had to face the Green Bay Packers. The Packers were the winners of the Super Bowl the previous year, and had a winning record. No one gave the Colts a chance to win the game. The coach, Lindy Infante, in a bid to encourage his team brought in a speaker to give a motivational speech. The speaker was Bob Wieland, a man who had crossed the country—on his hands. He was also the man who had run for five days just to complete the Boston Marathon—but had finished the course. Wieland had lost both his legs in Vietnam to a booby trapped mortar round, and he was familiar with difficult obstacles. He told the Colts to “...dig a little deeper.”¹

The Colts may have thought they had nothing more to give, but Wieland’s message got through. The Colts won the game 41 to 38. Afterward, Infante gave the game ball to Bob Wieland.

Bob Wieland could have given up after he lost his legs, but he didn’t. When he counsels to “dig a little deeper” you know it comes from a man who has been there, who has felt the pain of adversity yet who found a way to overcome.

When we face adversity there are two roads before us. The temptation is to blame God. That’s the low road, the road that leads to defeat. And remember, there are many reasons why we suffer, but God is not one of them. God is the Physician who comes to heal. He undertakes to repair the damage, and He does it in His own way. The second road is the road the Lord has walked. That road leads to victory. To understand why this is true we must understand something important: an artifact ought to praise its maker. The principle applies to everything man makes, and to man himself.

There is a story out of England about the managers at Vickers Shipbuilding and Engineering, Ltd. whose factory is at Barrow, England. These managers suffered severe embarrassment when workers welded a large section of a nuclear powered submarine onto another section—upside down. The British Navy ordered an inquiry to determine how it could have happened. "I don't think anyone can remember quite such a blunder," an employee of the company said. Correcting the mistake cost about \$1.86 million dollars, according to a trade union leader quoted by the British domestic news agency Press Association.²

¹ The Indianapolis Star/News ; ESPN ; http://bobwieland.com/new_site/index.php

² The London Daily Telegraph.

The blunder was an embarrassment to the company, and to the workers who did it. A man's work ought to praise him. God's work is no different. And He intends that His work praise Him.

In Jeremiah chapter 18 the Scripture says,

Jeremiah 18:1 The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying: 2 "Arise and go down to the potter's house, and there I will cause you to hear My words." 3 Then I went down to the potter's house, and there he was, making something at the wheel. 4 And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter; so he made it again into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to make. 5 Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying: 6 "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter?" says the LORD. "Look, as the clay *is* in the potter's hand, so *are* you in My hand, O house of Israel!"³

To the Romans, Paul wrote concerning the right of God over His creation,

Romans 9:20 But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, "Why have you made me like this?" 21 Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?

I have seen people who work in ceramics painstakingly shape the vessels they want, then place it in the furnace to bake it. Afterward, they may look it over, break it, and then the throw it on the trash heap.

Why do they break them? Why do artists throw away something they have spent hours creating? The answer is easy—because it does not please them, and they can't correct it. A work of art ought to please its maker by the way it is crafted, both in its beauty, and in the function of it.

Discipline is the way God corrects His work. The writer of Hebrews said,

Hebrews 12:6 For whom the LORD loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives." 7 If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? 8 But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. 9 Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? 10 For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. 11 Now no chastening seems to be

³ Quotations are from The New King James Version. Nashville : Thomas Nelson, 1982, S.

joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Robert Milligan wrote a commentary on the Book of Hebrews. He died during publication of the book. Writing a book is not an unusual thing to do, but for Milligan it was an achievement worthy of note. Milligan entered life as a farmer's boy. He learned early in life the virtues of work. Once, as he removed a stump from a field, an accident caused him a severe internal injury. Afterward, impaired and feeble, his physical disability caused him to give up farming. Searching for an occupation to employ himself, he entered the university. He distinguished himself in every course he studied. While still a young man, he suffered a violent attack of inflammatory rheumatism. The illness nearly proved fatal. It left his system further enfeebled, and vulnerable to other diseases. Neuralgia of the brain followed the rheumatism. The brain disorder affected his optic nerves, and rendered his eyes extremely sensitive to light. The sudden flashing of a light pierced his eyes as would a knife. Afterward, the pain forced him always to direct his eyes to the floor. That led strangers to wonder why he did not look them directly in the face. For some years before his death he could not read by lamp light, but depended entirely on the light of the sun. Even in the daytime he spared his eyes as much strain as he could by having members of his family read to him. Besides all this, his digestion was imperfect, and his throat and lungs became involved in his general prostration.

Robert Milligan wrote his commentary on the book of Hebrews in spite of his illness.

Commenting on "chastisement" in Hebrews chapter 12, Milligan wrote, "All chastisement, both human and Divine, give us present pain. This is its object; and without pain there can indeed be no chastisement. And hence it is for the time being, a matter not of joy but of grief. So we all feel and think. Though it is at first bitter to the taste, it nevertheless afterwards becomes a tree of life which yields constantly '...the peaceable fruit of righteousness.' That is, it produces righteousness as its fruit; and this fruit gives peace and consolation to the once grieved and troubled soul. 'It is, (as he quotes Tholuck) fruit in righteousness to be enjoyed in peace after the conflict is over.' ⁴

Milligan saw in suffering, as he said, "...the kind and gracious hand of God. It never fails to bring peace, joy, and consolation."

Another farmer might have said when Milligan lay stricken with disability caused by the root of a tree that here is a man whose life is over. He could never farm again. Yet, not all artwork is thrown away. Someone unfamiliar with the work might see the intermediate result and think the work is spoiled. The Lord

⁴ Milligan, R., The New Testament Commentary, the Epistle to the Hebrews, p. 351.

saw something else. He had another occupation in mind for this young, would-be farmer, and He had more shaping to do on the clay.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote,

2 Corinthians 4:16 Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. 17 For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, 18 while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal. 5:1 For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

Chastisement is painful for the present. It is a matter not of joy but of grief. But it is no different from the sufferings of Christ. In another place the writer of Hebrews says concerning Him,

Hebrews 5:7 who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, 8 though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. 9 And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him...

“He learned obedience through the things that He suffered...” How can the Christian expect any less?

There is a story about a businessman who enrolled his son in a well-known Ivy League university. The man visited the dean and looked over the catalog of courses. Dismayed, the businessman asked the dean, “Does my son have to take all these courses? Can’t you make it shorter? My son wants to complete his degree more quickly.”

“He could take a shorter course,” the dean answered, “but remember, when God makes an oak, He takes twenty years. A squash, however, takes only two months.”

The moral in this story is that we should not faint when God takes us to school. Some degrees take a few months; others take longer. God’s reproof should not discourage us. It proves His interest in us. As the writer says, “...illegitimate sons are ignored.” Only the sons are disciplined, and that for our good. So, being a son does not exempt us from the discipline of the Lord; on the contrary, it guarantees we will receive it.

In a similar way, Christ received the discipline of the Father. Not that He was punished for wrong doing, but that in the depths of God’s counsel He determined that the Messiah’s training included hardship. The obedience the Hebrew writer refers to is compliance with the will of God. In this compliance

the experience of Christ transcends the experience of every man. Although God honored Him, and exalted Him as worthy at the last, nevertheless, Christ went down to the lowest depths of human sorrow and suffering. For this, God designated Him High Priest, One preeminently qualified to serve at the altar, and to call attention to the sacrifice he brought.

The meaning of the word that is translated “designated” is properly, “saluted.” It is as the soldier who, standing in the ranks, is called by his commanding officer to receive the Medal of Honor. The soldier steps forward. The commander places the ribbon holding the coveted medal about his neck. Then the commander steps back, and in recognition of conspicuous gallantry in the performance of duty, salutes the soldier in the manner he deserves.

I once saw a newsreel that showed a naval aircraft carrier of the Second World War returning from duty in the war ravaged Pacific. A soldier watched from atop a hill that overlooked the entrance to San Francisco Bay. He looked on as the ship, battle scarred and listing to starboard, made its way slowly into port. Then, out of the depths of respect, as one soldier to another, he raised his hand in salute. It is the only fitting response, and one that is richly deserved for another who has served well and honorably in service.

The pattern, therefore, is suffering hardship in this life to be followed by reward later. God Himself confers the proper reward on the service. Worthwhile achievements follow the same pattern. This is true in any aspect of life.

After suffering defeat at Brandywine and Germantown, General George Washington led his army of 11,000 regulars to an encampment at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. The land lay in the icy grip of winter. Washington made his camp on the banks of the Schuylkill River, only 22 miles from Philadelphia. The British housed themselves in Philadelphia. So, while the British warmed themselves over the fires in Philadelphia, Washington shivered at Valley Forge. Wintering there was bad enough, but the winter of 1777 was harsh. No one could say that the ones who deserted did so without reason. The British had beaten the Continental Army twice; it was ill-housed, ill-fed, and literally thousands of the men were “...barefoot and otherwise naked.” Worse still, there was rampant disease and death. One must also add to these privations, the mismanagement of the food supplies, the inadequacy of transportation, the neglect of Congress, and public criticism. Perhaps in all this the Republic could have been stillborn.⁵

Yet, leadership prevailed, and that by the grace of God. The vindication of Washington’s courage and endurance came at Yorktown in 1781. Lord Cornwallis, the commander of the British Army, surrendered to Washington. The ragtag, and oft beaten, Continental Army had its victory. The electorate of the

⁵ Macartney.

new country exalted Washington to the presidency of the republic in 1789. His reward provided a fitting consummation for a life of duty and devotion.

The pattern that Washington and the Continental Army followed was the same that Christ laid down—suffering followed by honor. Worthwhile achievements in this life follow the same pattern established by Christ.

In the book of Acts Luke tells us that Jews from Antioch and Iconium, along with a multitude...”

Acts 14:19 ... stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. 20 However, when the disciples gathered around him, he rose up and went into the city. And the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe. 21 And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, 22 strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God."

Luke tells not of luxury and comfort, or of days of ease, but of tribulations. The writer of Hebrews said,

Hebrews 12:1 Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

A Christian today should not expect to be treated any differently by the world than were the Apostles, or the Lord. We accept our burdens and bear them in the knowledge that God knows, and has provided for all things. Suffering for the moment—which is in this life—may be difficult to bear, but we take comfort in the thought that it is only temporary. More than that we believe with Paul that it “...is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory...”