

“When Life Tumbles In”

a sermon by

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Text: “If you have raced with foot-runners and they have wearied you, how will you compete with horses? And if in a safe land you fall down, how will you fare in the thickets of the Jordan?” (Jeremiah 12:5)

Three weeks ago on a Thursday night at about 10:45 p.m. I received one of those phone calls that I am sure all ministers dread. A member of our church called to tell me that there had been a golf cart accident in Roaring Gap, North Carolina and that a young man in our church, Will Froelich, had been seriously injured in the accident and had been airlifted to Baptist Hospital in Winston- Salem. It was obvious from the voice of the individual on the line that this young man was in critical condition and probably would not make it through the night.

By the next morning the worst fears of those who knew this young man were realized. He had received a serious head wound and he had not survived.

Sometimes our lives seem to float along somewhat effortlessly and then something comes along that jars us from our complacency and reminds us of just how painful life can be.

Such was the case of a minister of the Church of Scotland by the name of Dr. Arthur John Gossip, who was the minister of the Beechgrove Church in Aberdeen, Scotland. In 1927 Gossip preached one of the most famous sermons in the history of the Church of Scotland. Entitled “When Life Tumbles In, What Then?” the sermon was preached shortly after the sudden death of his wife. Reading the sermon, even after all these years, one is stuck by the great amount of pathos, reflection, and faith that went into this sermon.

I.

The text that Gossip chose for this sermon was the passage from Jeremiah that we have just read. In many ways Jeremiah stands as the greatest prophet of the Old Testament. He was certainly a “man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.”

Often, when we speak of prophets, we speak of individuals who predicted the future, and certainly prophets did that. But the fundamental role of the prophet was a messenger. The

prophet was one who had stood in the presence of God and delivered the message of God with the famous formula: "Thus says the Lord."

For Jeremiah the message God had given him brought him great pain and sadness. It was his burden to speak to the people of Judah the word of judgment that God had given him. The people had broken the covenant that God had made with them at Sinai. Therefore they were to be punished.

The context of this punishment was a series of events that took place around 586 B.C. The Babylonian Army, led by King Nebuchadnezzar, attacked the city of Jerusalem, burned down the holy Temple and laid the city to ruins. The Babylonians also took the King of Judah and many of the leaders of the people into exile to Babylon. Late in his life Jeremiah was taken to Egypt against his will. He left behind a series of great poems and oracles unmatched by any prophetic writing in the Old Testament.

Characteristic of Jeremiah's prophecy was a series of laments in which the prophet railed against God over what he found around him. The passage from which I just read takes the form of a legal case in which the prophet brings a charge against the almighty. He laments the fact that the guilty and treacherous thrive while the innocent often suffer.

The answer that God gives to him is hardly what one would expect. Instead of comfort, he receives reproof. God replies to Jeremiah by saying that if Jeremiah cannot compete with foot runners, how does he expect to do in a race against horses, and if in a safe land he falls down, how does he expect to fare in the jungle of the Jordan? (Jeremiah 12:5-6)

Most of us understand this. When some difficulty besets us, we run quickly into the presence of God, angry and filled with resentment. But then in a better moment, we check ourselves, remembering that what we have experienced is not much different from what others have felt as well. It is then that the words of Jeremiah break through to us. If we have caught our breath when splashing through the shallow waters of some summer stream, how will we do when the river Jordan breaks its banks and suddenly we are caught in a swelling of water that is filled with angry waves. Suppose, like Job, we were to receive the dreadful tidings of disaster that signaled the loss of children and wealth as well. Would we be able to say with Job, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord." Or, if like the prophet Ezekiel, we were to hear from God without any warning this bleak word: "Son of man, behold I take away the desire of your eyes with a stroke; yet neither shall you weep, nor let the tears run down." "So," says the prophet, "I preached to the people in the morning, and in the evening my wife died."

II.

One thing is certain. We do not understand these experiences when life suddenly tumbles in and suddenly we are facing some great loss, some vicious disease, or some dreaded circumstance in our lives. The prophet Isaiah warns us that "God's ways are not our ways and his thoughts not our thoughts."

We may not be able to understand some of these events of life, but surely this is not a time to move away from our faith but to move toward it. Dr. Gossip put it like this: “You people in the sunshine may believe the faith, but those of us who are living in the shadows must believe it . We have nothing else.”

It was Christ who said, “I will not leave you comfortless” and certainly those are words that we cleave to. For certainly the Christian hope is well expressed in the notion that God does not abandon us in moments of great loss.

In the National Gallery in London there is a painting that depicts Christ hanging on the cross in a dense darkness. At first that is all that one can see. But gradually there is another form, God’s form; and other hands supporting Christ, God’s hands, and another face, God’s face, even more full of agony than Christ’s face. The presence, the sufficiency, the sympathy of God, these things grow very real and very sure and very wonderful.

III.

Then, too in the face of death we affirm our belief about immortality. Most contemporary theologians are very reluctant to speak about eternal life, but as Austin Farrer once observed, the Christian faith does not make much sense without this belief.

The Apostle Paul understood this very clearly. In writing to the church at Corinth he observed, “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.” (I Corinthians 15:19)

Eternal life is described in detail in the New Testament. Hence the Christian believer has to speak by hope and by faith and not by sight. And yet there are some things that we can say.

Eternal life promises us that there are some things in this life that are not fulfilled, and without some sense of life beyond death, there are many things that simply don’t make sense. Karl Menninger, a noted psychiatrist who spent his life dealing with mentally ill people, once was asked if he believed in eternal life or whether he simply believed that the notion of eternal life was nothing more than a wish for “pie in the sky.” Menninger replied by saying that if it is nothing more than “pie in the sky” then there are a lot of people who are not going to get any pie. Human life is often very difficult and there are many people who do not share the joys that most of us take for granted.

IV.

There is something else about these times in which life tumbles in on us, taking away our breath and leaving us cold and shattered. They are opportunities for faith to be strengthened and for a spirit of compassion to be born within us.

A friend of mine, Dr. Howard Edington, was for many years the minister of the First Presbyterian Church in Orlando, Florida. One night he experienced something that changed his life forever. On a stormy December night he and his wife were asleep in their home when the phone rang at 3:00 a.m. When Dr. Edington answered the phone, the voice on the other end said,

“There are Orlando policemen at your door, please let them in.” Out of the rain and into their kitchen stepped a police officer and the police chaplain, delivering the worse news that any parent can receive: “There has been a terrible automobile accident and your son did not survive.”

In a sermon Howard Edington preached the Sunday after the death of his twenty-two year old son, he said this to the congregation that had gathered: “Dear Friends,” he said, “I have been to the bottom. I have been to where life hurts the most and cuts the deepest and hits the hardest. Therefore, listen to me when I tell you that faith in Jesus Christ is not some sideline pursuit, some pleasant diversion, some enjoyable hobby in your life. It is not something you give yourself to when it is convenient or when it helps you along your career track or when you want to appear respectable. It is not just a part of your life. You have to see it as the center of your life, the foundation of your whole existence. Nothing else in your life really matters, nothing else in your life will last. When the police chaplain says, ‘Your son did not survive,’ I can tell you that you find out right then that the only thing you have left is faith.”

There is something else. When life tumbles in, we are often given a new set of eyes by which we see more clearly the hurt of others. Granted, it is a price none of us would ever want to pay. But it is a fact. Most of us are not naturally profound. We have to be forced down.

Robert Browning Hamilton’s poem puts it like this:

“I walked mile with Pleasure,
She chattered all way;
But left me none the wiser
For all she had to say.
I walked a mile with Sorrow
And ne’er a word said she;
But oh, the things I learned from her
When Sorrow walked with me.”

Yes, these things do come. For years and years you and I go our sunny way and live our happy lives, and the rumors 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. Then, suddenly, we find ourselves not in some sunny stream beside a mountain but in the midst of the swelling Jordan River with the cold of it taking our breath away and the waves sweeping away our footing, and life comes tumbling in. So, what then?

Arthur John Gossip concludes his sermon with these words. He says, “I do not think you need to 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? Not 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 (In Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*), can call back to you who one day in your turn will have to cross it, “Be of good cheer, for I feel the bottom, and it is sound.”

Amen.