

Brothers and Sisters, when we may question the Love or providence of God in difficulty. Remember God is pressing you near to His breast. Start breathing your prayer to Him. Take your time as you read the following. Pastor Slayden.

### **Hard Places In The Way Of Faith**

***By A. B. Simpson***

Let us read for our text Acts 27:44 – *“And the rest, some on boards, and some on broken pieces of the ship. And so it came to pass, that they escaped all safe to land.”*

The marvelous story of Paul’s voyage to Rome with its trials and triumphs is a fine pattern of the lights and shades of the way of faith all through the story of human life. The remarkable feature of it is the hard and narrow places which we find intermingled with God’s most extraordinary interventions and providences.

It is the common idea that the pathway of faith is strewn with flowers, and that when God intervenes in the life of His people He does it on a scale so grand that He lifts us quite out of the plane of difficulties. The actual fact, however, is that the real experience is quite contrary. It is only when we come to trust God that we meet the trials and difficulties. The story of the Bible is one of alternate trial and triumph in the case of every one of the cloud of witnesses from Abel down to the latest martyr.

Look at the patriarchal story. Abraham went out, believing God, to meet the promise of a glorious inheritance – but the first thing he found was famine and desolation in the land of promise, compelling him to go down to Egypt for his very subsistence. His whole life was a story of narrow places and painful testings, and every blessing was wrung, as it were, from the very jaws of difficulty and natural impossibility.

Still more was Isaac’s a suffering life. Petty trials marked the whole pathway for the patriarch. His favorite son became a bitter disappointment. The wells he dug in the desert became a cause of jealous contention on the part of his neighbors, and he was pushed from place to place, until his steppings were marked by names which recall only associations of pain and sorrow.

Jacob’s life was one long scene of testing, and looking back even from the sunlight of his closing and happier days he could only say in retrospect, *“Few and evil have the days of the years of my life been”* (Gen. 47:9).

Above all the patriarchal family, Joseph seemed born for trial. The opening vision of his faith was bright as heaven, but soon it was darkly clouded by treachery and crime on the part of his brethren – long years of exile, ignominy, unjust suspicion and protracted suspense until, at last, *“the iron entered into his soul,”* and his deliverance when it came was like Paul’s escape from shipwreck – through the most trifling providential incidents.

So Moses passed through the narrow places of difficulty and bitter trial, and his choice was *“to suffer affliction with the people of God”* (Heb. 11:25).

David, Israel's first king, and Christ's glorious type, even after he was promised the throne, and anointed king, was hunted as a partridge in the mountains of Judah, and compelled to fly from refuge to refuge in the caves and deserts. He was narrowly saved again and again.

But need we go any further than the great Example Himself, whose name is the "Man of Sorrows," whose life was made "perfect through sufferings"? He in infancy was compelled to flee from Herod's bloody hand to Egypt for protection. He could not be spared the bitter agony of the garden and the Cross in the accomplishing of our redemption.

Like Him, the great Apostle Paul was more than anything else an example of how much a child of God can suffer. The very first experience after his conversion was of this character. On account of his testifying for the Lord in Damascus he was hunted down by persecuting Jews, and obliged to flee for his life. But we behold no heavenly chariot transporting the holy apostle amid thunderbolts of flame from the reach of his foes, but "*through a window in a basket*" was he let down over the walls of Damascus (2 Cor. 11:33), and so escaped their hands. In an old clothes basket, like a bundle of laundry, or groceries, the servant of Jesus Christ was dropped from the window and ignominiously fled from the hate of his foes.

So, again we find him left for months in the lonely dungeons. We find him telling of his watchings, his fastings and his desertion by friends, of his brutal and shameful beatings before an insulting rabble, and here, even after God has promised by a heavenly vision to deliver him, we see him for days left to toss upon a stormy sea, obliged to stand guard over the treacherous seamen, and tell them that their presence is indispensable for the saving of the passengers.

And at last when the deliverance comes, there is no heavenly galley sailing from the skies to take off the noble prisoner. There is no angel form walking upon the waters and stilling the raging breakers. There is no supernatural sign of the transcendent miracle that is being wrought. But one is compelled to seize a spar, and another a floating plank, and another climb on a fragment of the wreck, and another to strike out and swim for his life. And so the strange commonplace story reads, "*some on boards, and some on broken pieces of the ship. And so it came to pass, that they escaped all safe to land.*"

### **God's Pattern for Us**

Beloved, here is God's pattern for our own lives. Here is a Gospel of help for people that have to live in this everyday world with real and ordinary surroundings, and a thousand practical conditions which have to be met in a thoroughly practical way. God's promises, and God's providences do not lift us out of the plane of common sense and commonplace trial, but it is through these very things that faith is perfected, and that God loves to interweave the golden threads of His love along the warp and woof of our everyday experience.

It is most helpful to us to realize that we have a God who thus comes into the most commonplace things. It is no evidence that He has failed us if He allows ten thousand difficulties on every side to throng us, and if He delivers us in answer to prayer at last through straits so narrow that we seem to be barely delivered at the very point of disaster and from the very jaws of destruction.

Let us therefore not be discouraged if God lets the way be hard and the path be long and the feet sometimes grow weary. He is with us still working just as truly as if He was the moving pillar of cloud and flame with us; as He walked with them to Emmaus so simple, so unobtrusive, so like themselves that they never realized it was the Lord until their hearts began to burn within them through His kindling words and wondrous teachings.

Let us learn to recognize Him in the hard places. Let us learn to see Him in the little things. Let us be willing to take the answer to our prayers and the fulfillment of our life purpose in the most commonplace things. Thus everything shall become sacred and life shall be all sublime, and some day, *“Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree, and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle tree: and it shall be to the Lord for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off”* (Isa. 55:13).

### **Our Insufficiencies and Failures**

Hard places are valuable in revealing to us ourselves, and showing us our insufficiencies and failures. They are God’s great blasting processes in the work of spiritual excavation, and must precede the higher work of building up the life and character. We never know what graces and qualities we possess until the test comes, and then the faith and courage that glowed with such a flame in the moment of enthusiasm and inspiration finds its true level, and the soul is thrown back in its nothingness and helplessness upon Christ alone to find in Him its all in all.

This was the meaning of Jacob’s trials, to bring him to the end of self. This was the purpose of Job’s afflictions, to slay his self-righteous confidence. This was the blessing that came from Peter’s fall – it broke his pride and self-sufficiency, and sent him forth to lean upon his Lord and find strength outside himself in Christ alone.

This is why the Lord still tries you to convince you thoroughly that your estimate of your own strength is utterly false and exaggerated, and to bring you to that place where it will be truly, *“Not I, but Christ liveth in me”* (Gal. 2:20).

### **God’s All-sufficiency**

Hard places help us next to know the resources of God. It is only under difficult circumstances that we know His all-sufficiency. Israel must first stand still and next behold the salvation of God. When they ceased from their acting, God revealed His power. And so He tells them that the reason He led them through the wilderness and exposed them to a situation where there were no natural supplies of any kind – was to teach them that He was adequate for every need, and that, *“man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord”* (Deut. 8:3). God can only become real to us up to the measure of our actual needs, and every difficult situation is just a vessel for Him to fill, and an occasion for Him to show Himself in His infinite wisdom, power and grace.

The Apostle Paul tells us, therefore, that he was exposed to every sort of difficulty in order that the power of Christ might rest upon him according to his needs, and therefore he welcomed each new situation as another vessel for God to fill and another occasion for Him to say, *“My grace is sufficient for thee”* (2 Cor. 12:9).

Beloved, are we thus proving and finding Him equal to all the conditions of our lives, and glorying in being able to tell the world that our God shall supply all our need according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus?

### **Confidence in God**

Trial is the fruitful soil of trust. Difficulties are the divine incentives which demand and develop our confidence in the divine faithfulness and love.

It is so easy for us to lean upon the things that we can see and feel that it is an entirely new experience for us to stand alone and walk with the unseen God as Peter walked upon the sea. But it is the lesson we must learn if we are ever to dwell in the eternal realm, and faith shall be our only sense and God shall be our All in all. Very gently does He suit the test to our feeble strength, and lead us on as we are able from more to more.

### **Prayer, Love, Patience and Courage**

Hard places teach us to pray and constrain us to be much alone with God. They drove Jacob to his knees at the fords of Jabbok (Gen. 32:22-32). They taught David to find *“the secret place of the Most High”* (Psa. 91:1). They made the life of Paul one of ceaseless dependence upon the presence of his Lord, and they have inspired as well as sustained the divine communion which most of us have learned to prove as the supreme resource and solution of our lives. It is very humbling that it should be true that God must press His children to His breast by suffering and need. But it is, alas, too often the case that ease and comfort lead us to at least partial independence of Him. Our most spiritual seasons and the times that have brought God most near have been times of which we could say, *“Thou hast known my soul in adversities”* (Psa. 31:7).

Hard places teach us to love. When God wants to soften and refine our spirit and answer our prayers for a baptism of patience and love, He has to let the discipline of ill treatment, injustice and often the severest wrong compel us to go to Him for the charity that “beareth all things,” that “endureth all things.” Of course, we find out first that we have not the love adequate for the test. As the Holy Spirit convicts us of our sins He leads us to the source of strength. Then as we gradually learn the humbling lesson He leads us on from day to day in deeper testing and sweeter refining until we can thank Him for the fire that brought us more of His Spirit’s grace and His own overcoming love.

Hard places teach us patience. Patience is the crowning grace of the Christian life, and when it has its perfect work then we become *“perfect and entire, wanting nothing”* (Jas. 1:4). Often, therefore, the latest and the crowning lesson of the spiritual life is in the school of suffering.

Hard places teach us courage. They take away the fear of suffering, the dread of pain, and enable us to put on His strength and courage, and rise above the power of fear until we welcome the conflict, and stand with scars of the conflict and victory as good soldiers of Christ.

### **Object Lessons of God’s Grace and Power**

Hard places make us patterns and object lessons for the help of others and for the glory of God, showing to the world what Christ can do for His children, and what Christ-lives may accomplish where others fail. God wants us to be a spectacle to angels and to men, showing to

them in our example that Christ can keep in every situation, and that the power of His grace is practical, supernatural and adapted to every human life.

Hard places fit us to help others by the lessons we have learned in our own experience. The callous and immature heart is little qualified to comfort, counsel and bless a suffering world. God has to burn in us first what we are to give out to our fellows. The painful ordeal of a real experience qualifies us to comfort, strengthen and encourage the souls to whom He has to send us, and to whom we can say, "I have been there, and I can tell you from the depths of my own experience that *'my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus'* " (Phil. 4:19).

Hard places make Christ real, just as real as the trouble is. They are the heavenly stamps by which God's messages and God's communications of grace and blessing are embossed and made to stand out in relief from our lives. The picture is first cut, and then burned into that card by the heavy stamp and the glowing flame, and then it becomes what we call relief work, and everybody can see it and feel it.

So God cuts and burns His messages into human lives until Christ becomes to us real as the tears we have shed, the fears under which we have trembled, the sorrows that were ready to overwhelm us, and the difficulties which rose like mountains before us – so that the sweetest memories of our lives are the hard places which have become stepping stones and monuments of divine and heavenly things.

Hard places win for us eternal crowns. They become occasions for victory and reward. The soldier of Christ is winning a record and a crown which will never pass away.