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The Things Which Befall Us

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"For we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning our affliction which befell us in Asia, that we were weighed down exceedingly, beyond our power, insomuch that we despaired even of life: yea, we ourselves have had the sentence of death within ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raiseth the dead: who delivered us out of so great a death, and will deliver: on whom we have set our hope that he will also still deliver us" (2 Cor. 1:8-10).

The Fact of the Experience of Suffering

The first thing that comes to us from this little bit of Paul's autobiography is the fact of this experience. He does not seem to regard it as some extraordinary thing. He takes it, it would seem, almost as the normal course of the life of a servant of God. He simply speaks of it as something which befell him in Asia - almost like a normal happening. Great and evidently terrible as it was, it is taken as something which just befell, happened, occurred; and this would say to us that the tremendous experiences of adversity and suffering and trial through which the Lord's people go must not be regarded as spiritual catastrophes, as if everything has gone wrong, our universe is going to pieces, Satan is simply carrying everything away and the Lord is left stranded and defeated. That is a strong way of putting it, but it is said merely to draw attention to this fact, that in the course of the life of a very true and faithful and devoted servant who stands for the Lord's highest and fullest interests, things like this do befall him. The word here is better expressed by our word "converge upon." You and I, in the time of difficulty and adversity, deep suffering and trial, are so

often tempted to think that something very wrong has taken place, and there is a big question as to whether it ought to be, seeing we belong to the Lord. We are really in heart devoted to the Lord, we mean business with Him - and now look at this! Well, it befell and it befalls. We must get to the point of a conclusion about this, that there is no charm resting upon the life of the most devoted child of God, there is no special providence to say that no adversity shall overtake, shall befall. It just does happen, it is a fact, and that is where we begin.

It happened to Paul, it befell him, it "converged upon" him, but he does not raise any questions at all about God or about spiritual issues in such a way as to lead him into difficulties with the Lord. Are you one whose way has been, and perhaps still is, one of great adversity, trial, suffering, perplexity? It has happened to you, it has overtaken, it has befallen you. Well, Paul is not alone in this, that it is a part of the course of things. It has a meaning; but my point at the moment is that these things are facts. You cannot get away from them. You must settle down to it that they are facts to be recognised and accepted as making up the lot of a true servant and child of God. That is where we begin.

Exercise in Regard to the Experience

But then there is another thing here. Of course, we do not know what was the exact nature of this particular trial. Some think it refers to Paul's time in Ephesus and that he was nigh unto being flung to wild beasts in the arena. He did say on another occasion that he fought with beasts at Ephesus, speaking metaphorically (1 Cor. 15:32). It may have been that, but it is more probable that it was some terrible illness which overtook him, some sickness which brought him to an end of all hope. Whatever it was, he says: "We despaired even of life; yea, we ourselves have had the sentence of death within ourselves." You wonder why he repeats that word "ourselves." That is the difficulty of translation. If it were put into literal English, it would be something like this. "We doomed ourselves"; that is, We came to a verdict ourselves about the situation. As to ourselves, our verdict was - This is the end, death! But what we want particularly to note is the exercise that the affliction produced in Paul. Evidently he had been looking into this thing, scrutinising it and saying, What is the Divine meaning in my situation? What does the Lord mean by this? Although it looks like a hap, it has befallen me, yet the Lord has something bound up with it. There was enquiry and exercise about the situation, and in his prayerful investigation, he comes to realise what the Lord's mind is, and he sums it all up in the little word - *that*. "We have had the sentence of death within ourselves, *that* we should not trust in ourselves, but in God..." All this happened in order that... There was a Divine object, a Divine meaning, something quite precise. In order that...

Well then, the second step is that we must have inward exercise in order to find out what the Lord means by the things which befall us, because nothing happens to a true child of God without the Lord having a meaning in it. There must be exercise until we come to the point where we are able to say, Oh, I see - that is the Lord's object and aim and purpose. It is in order that... What a mighty "that"! It is the issue of a prayerful enquiry as to why we are permitted to go through some of the dark ways of trial and suffering in which we despair. We come to an end, and we pass sentence upon ourselves. We say, "Well, I am finished, I am at an end: so far as I am concerned, it is death, there is no hope." We pass the sentence. But we believe that God has something in it and we have got to get that out of it; the result must be a concrete "that..."

The Explanation - "God Who Raiseth the Dead"

That leads right up to the final thing, "...that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raiseth the dead." It is a passing right over from one ground to another, from the ground of ourselves to the ground of God. In ourselves there is death, an end; but with God there is a beginning - "who raiseth the dead." It is the whole history of the Church gathered up into a little clause of four words. It is the whole object of the Church in this dispensation, wrung out of the soul exercise of this man Paul. What is the history of the Church? What is the Divine object in the Church in this dispensation? It is that in every part God shall have opportunity of showing that by Jesus Christ He has conquered death and triumphed over all the limitations and all the finalities of what is natural, and has made possible the limitless fullness of resurrection life. Dear friends, it is true that at the last the Church will be seen to have been God's instrument in establishing in this universe the fact that through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, death, that age-long enemy of God and man, has been absolutely destroyed. That truth is going to be worked out through the Church. "Now unto principalities and the powers in the heavenlies might be made known through the church the manifold wisdom of God" (Eph. 3:10). In all that is this central thing - death. What do we mean by death? We are not talking simply of physical death, but of a great spiritual thing. Death is the thing which pronounces an end. Whenever you and I say, This is the end, we are finished! - we have succumbed to death. That is the verdict of death, for death always says that. The Church should never believe in ends - that is to capitulate to death. Although a thousand times in ourselves we might feel the end has come, in the very experience which brings us to that place God has invested a new realisation that in Him that finality is cancelled out. We should never expect an end until God says, That is the end! He is the God of hope, "who... begat us again unto a living hope, by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, unto an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away" (1 Pet. 1:3-4). If we leave out the negative and read only the positive statement in the passage which we are considering we read: "That we should... trust in God who raiseth the dead."

Are you expecting ends, limitation, feeling that for you there is no hope, no future? Do not believe it! Get down to this and see it as the great eternal fact - God is trying to bring us to the place where we stop expecting what the Devil is constantly offering through circumstances - death, an end, limitation. God is all the time thinking of increase, enlargement. That is the history of the Church. Again and again, generally and in individual cases, it has been said, This is the end: it is all over: the Lord has done with us; and yet - oh, how slow we are to learn it, to get it fixed, established! - it does not prove to be the end, does it? We find that there is still a lease of life, still something more in the Lord's intention; and even when the point is really reached of an end here on earth, we do not believe that is the end of life and work - it is emancipation unto fullness.

These are very simple things, but all hang upon this little word "that." God allows very deep and hard and painful things - things which bring us in ourselves really to the point of giving up, where we pass the verdict of death upon ourselves. He allows them with this object, that - however much we may have known and proved the truth in our earlier experience - He may bring us yet a stage further into the power and good of it, that God raiseth the dead. If He does that, then there is hope for anybody and for anything. The Lord give us more of this disciplined, instructed, enlightened faith. We cannot come to it by being told it, by hearing it a thousand times, but only by experience. Some of you know what we are talking about. You know despair, you know hopeless situations, you know what it is to come to the place where you are finished and throw up your hands. If you do not, you may know it yet. The Lord is after getting us, as many as He can, through to that place where, in and through His

Church, death is swallowed up in victory, death is no more. That is practically the last word of the Bible. Nearly the first words of the Bible are about the entrance of death; the tree of life was cut off. At the end of the Bible we read "Death shall be no more" (Rev. 21:4). That has got to be wrought out in an instrument, and we know that that process is very practical. The Lord enable us to learn that lesson and gain the vantage ground of the triumph of Christ's resurrection.