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The Lord's Attitude To His Children In Adversity

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the Angel of His presence saved them: in His love and in His pity He redeemed them; and He bare them, and carried them all the days of old" (Isa. 63:9).

The first clause of that verse is what will occupy us for a few minutes, and it will be as in the more correct translation that some of you will find in the margin of your Bibles. While there is some authority for the ordinary translation of the words here, the actual language of the original reads thus - "In all their adversity He was no adversary." You can choose between the translations which you like best, and you will not be in error if you prefer one to the other; but this alternative translation to the usual text conveys a message of its own which I think should be of very great help, encouragement and strength to us.

The Fact Of Adversity

First of all, we note that adversity amongst the people of God is recognised and accepted - that is, it is taken for granted. It is unnecessary to say that, amongst the people of God, adversity is a fact. None of us requires to be told that. Here the word of God takes note of the fact that the Lord's people do know and suffer adversity, and their adversity is under His eye. That is only said lest anybody should think that adversity signifies that things have gone wrong. Perhaps at times we do feel that because of severe and continuous adversity there must be something wrong. While there may be a realm in which the adversity is the result of some wrong-doing, the enemy having rightful ground, nevertheless that is not the thing that is referred to here. In the first instance, it was not adversity because of evil and wrong; it was the adversity which is the common experience of the Lord's people who are moving with Him; and when it is like that, as we shall see in a moment, there is nothing wrong about it at all. So much by the way for the *fact* of adversity.

The Nature Of The Adversity

Then we come to the nature of the adversity referred to here. The word "adversity" is really the word "straitness" - "In all their straitness He was no adversary" - and that thought of straitness is capable of manifold application. What was the straitness referred to? Well, Israel is here seen as in the wilderness. You notice that all the phrases which follow take you back to Israel's life in the wilderness, and it was the life in the wilderness with its many forms of straitness to which the word referred.

First of all, they were shut up with regard to many things which the world had, and the world could do, which constituted the whole life of the world and gave the world its pleasure and, so far as it went, its satisfaction. They were cut off from all that, and sometimes that form of straitness came home to them very hardly and severely. You know when they got into a very bad time how their hearts went back to Egypt and they thought and dwelt upon the onions and the garlic and all the rest of the things there. In Egypt we did have this and that and the other thing which we miss now, and it is hard to be cut off, as we are, from those things; there was a certain element of certainty in Egypt, but out here you never know where you are going to be one day from another, or what is going to happen to you - so far as actual evidence is concerned you do not know whether you are going to be fed tomorrow. It is all such a life of faith, and faith is a life of straitness so often, cut off from much and shut up to this wilderness where things are, to the natural mind, 'narrowed down' to God. *(We know that is the wrong way of putting it - to the spiritual mind things are expanded to God; but who has got fully there, to the place where always earthly straitness is really heavenly enlargement?)* Naturally, this is how it was with Israel - shut in, narrowed down, pent up, straitened so far as many things in this world were concerned. Because they were the Lord's people they could not do this nor have that. There was a whole realm of things cut off from them; naturally, in the soul, it was straitness.

Adversity No Proof That The Lord Is Our Adversary

When you and I begin to feel that - and there are days when the pure, unsullied joy of the Lord Himself and of heavenly things becomes clouded and veiled and remote, and we seem to be far more sensitive to the straitness of our lives and how we are shut up - how quickly the enemy comes in and says, "The Lord is against you! This is not the goodness of the Lord, this is not the bountifulness and graciousness of the Lord, this kind of life really is not the life that the Lord promised you." In our hearts and minds he tries to turn the Lord to be our adversary because of the consciousness of the present situation of difficulty. He misrepresents the Lord; he gives to the Lord the colour of our trial, of our difficulty, and says, "The Lord is like that, He is a hard master to serve; this Christian life is not all that it was represented to be; the Lord has deceived you, He has failed you; and so on." He twists the whole thing to malign the Lord.

What the word here is saying is quite definitely this - in all that straitness, that privation, that pent-up-ness the Lord was not against them; however it seemed, the Lord really was not against them. Then we must find some other explanation. The facts are very real, these conditions are very true. Adversity, trial, suffering are very real, and if they do not mean that the Lord is against us, what is the explanation?

The Lord's Intention Of Good

The only alternative, surely, is that the Lord is meaning this for good - that in His intention it is not ultimately for our limitation and deprivation but for our enlarging, for our enrichment. Evidently the

Lord means other than the circumstances seem to say He means. In all this straitness He is not against you. "If God be for us...?" (Romans 8:31). In the adversity, the straitness, the cutting off of many things, the saying 'No' to a lot, the Lord is not against you, He is not out to rob you of any really good thing, to take from you any real pleasure, He is not working contrary, to your interests, He is no adversary; but in all, He is *for* you while you are in the way of His will, going on with Him.

I said that that word "straitness" is capable of manifold application. I am not going to pursue in any detail those lines along which it could be applied. You know straitness. How often the enemy shuts the doors and then says the Lord has shut them because He is against you! How often the enemy brings you into suffering, puts upon you something, and then says, "It is the Lord!" How often the enemy tries to becloud your assurance and bring condemnation and accusation upon you, and to bring you under a sense of judgment, and then says, "It is the Lord!" Not a bit of it! That is not necessarily the explanation or interpretation at all. You notice that the first phase of this thing finds the people out and moving with the Lord, and as they did so, they came into this adversity of many kinds; and the declaration is that this did not mean that the Lord was against them.

If we wanted to, we could gather up many Scriptures to show how the Lord was really for them in those very days of difficulty and adversity. I just give it to you as something to put your feet upon.

The Lord The Adversary Of The Rebellious

The passage moves into another and darker stage. "They rebelled... therefore He was turned to be their enemy" - their adversary (Isa. 63:10). But even when we state that dark aspect of the thing, it only enhances the other. Have you rebelled against the Lord? Can it really be said of you that you have taken the attitude which these people came to take? You know some of the hard and terrible things which they said in their rebellion, when their hearts turned away from the Lord. In effect, they said, We do not want this Lord any more; we will not have this Lord any more. Can that be said of you? Well, then, the Lord in such situations must turn to be the enemy of that, and be your enemy while you are in that position; He cannot stand by you while you are there. But if it is not like that with you, and despite all weaknesses and all failures, faults, imperfections (yes, we are never without something that might well be condemned in us) nevertheless our hearts are toward the Lord, it is our desire to go on with Him, then He is no adversary. Yes, many imperfections, but He is no adversary. It is when we, like these people, deliberately and positively turn and rebel against the Lord, and say, in effect, We will not obey, we are not going on! then He turns to be our adversary. That means He has to bring into judgment.

The Lord's Love To The Rebellious

But even so, the third phase is a very blessed one. "Then He remembered..." (Isa. 63:11). Even when He had to be their adversary because of the attitude which they had adopted, the end of it is 'He remembered.... Moses,' He remembered His word; and the last phase is that He came back in love to restore. In the end the Lord reaches out even to the rebellious. "Yea, the rebellious also" says the Word (Psa. 68:18). "He knoweth our frame; He remembereth that we are dust" (Psa. 103:14). Are you one of those who at some time has really turned in heart, in hardness and bitterness and sourness, against the Lord because of the difficulty of the way and you have become very rebellious against Him, and how the enemy says, The whole thing is hopeless; you see you have shut the door, and that is the end! Oh, how this enemy will take hold of everything to use it for our destruction! But, even if we have done that, the end is "He remembered...." It is a marvellous overture of His love again to the rebellious.

They are going on with the Lord; they suffer adversity, but that does not mean He is against them. They rebel against Him, and He has to bring them into discipline; at that time He must be against them. But that need not be the established, permanent situation. "His mercy endureth for ever" (Psa. 106:1, etc.). If in our hearts at some time or other we have become bitter, have felt the Lord was too hard and the way anything but the way of His love, if we have entertained bitter and rebellious thoughts, Satan comes in to try and consolidate them into some unalterable situation that has forever closed the door in terms of unpardonable sin. Yet - the Lord remembered His word, and His love is found, after all, not to have changed. Not until we have got beyond this time here on this earth need it ever be said, There is no hope, the door is closed! I hope there are not many who have turned and rebelled. If you have, here is a word of comfort and encouragement for you.

The main word, however, is for the majority of us who, while our hearts are toward the Lord, find much straitness, much shutting up of the way, much narrowing down, much cutting off, much that to the natural life seems a dark way; yet it does not mean the Lord is against us. It means just the opposite. The Lord is after an enlargement that is much more than enlargement of this life here. Although we have all here, and yet are small in the measure of Christ, what have we gained? We have gained nothing. So if the enlargement of Christ seems to mean the narrowing of self and the world, that is the evidence of the Lord *for* us, and not against us. "In all their adversity He was no adversary." In all their straitness, He was not against them.