Looking at the Right Side

by J.R. Miller

The sermon emphasizes the importance of viewing life's trials through faith to recognize God's love and purpose in our afflictions.

Scripture: John 15:1
Topics: "God's Providence", "Faith in Trials"

Description

J.R. Miller emphasizes the importance of viewing life's trials through the lens of faith, illustrating that the painful experiences we endure are often God's loving prunings meant to enhance our spiritual fruitfulness. He uses vivid imagery, such as the beauty of a rainbow after rain and a flower viewed from different angles, to convey that our perspective can transform our understanding of suffering. Miller reassures that afflictions are not signs of God's disapproval but rather indications of His care and desire for us to grow. He encourages believers to trust in God's goodness, even when circumstances seem bleak, and to recognize that every trial has a divine purpose. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a faith that believes in God's goodness, even when it is not immediately visible.

Transcript

Very much heart-pain is caused, by looking at the wrong side of God's providences. If we could only see the strange things of our lives in their true light, perplexity would vanish and the darkest experiences would be brightened--as night is brightened by the shining stars.

Late on a summer afternoon rain began to fall. For half an hour it fell in gentle shower. All the while the sky in the low west was cloudless, and the sun, near his setting, shone in undimmed radiance. Through the falling shower his beams poured, making a scene of wonderful beauty. The crystal raindrops looked like diamonds as the sun's rays touched them, and the whole air seemed full of brilliant gems. Arching the eastern horizon a wondrous rainbow appeared, all its colors dazzling in their bright beauty. So it is to the eye of Christian faith--when the clouds of trial gather overhead and the rain falls; it is still clear where the Father looks down upon his children. No clouds cover his face; the beams of his love stream through the falling shower; every teardrop becomes a precious gem, and the rainbow of peace glows upon the clouds. The Christian needs only to behold his sorrow in the true light--to see it thus transfigured.

"Be still, sad heart, and cease repining:

Behind the clouds--is the sun still shining.

Your fate is the common fate of all;

Into each life--some rain must fall,

Some days must be dark and dreary."

One Christmas a friend sent the poet Whittier a flower pressed between two pieces of glass. On one side, the appearance was without beauty--only an indistinct, blurred mass of something held beneath the pane--but on the other side the full exquisite beauty of the flower appeared delicately outlined under the glass. The poet hung the token on his window, turning the lovely side inward. Those who passed by outside, looking up, marked only a "gray disc of clouded glass," seeing no beauty, perchance wondering that the poet would cherish anything so void of beauty; but he, sitting within, looked at the token, and saw outlined against the winter sky all the exquisite loveliness of the flower.

"They cannot from their outlook see

The perfect grace it has for me;

For there the flower whose fringes through

The frosty breath of autumn blew

Turns from without its face of bloom

To the warm tropic of my room,

As fair as when beside its brook

The hue of bending skies it took.

"But deeper meanings come to me,

My half-immortal flower, from Thee:

Man judges from a partial view;

None ever yet his brother knew.

The eternal Eye that sees the whole

May better read the darkened soul,

And find, to outward sense denied,

The flower upon its inmost side."

There is a side of perfect beauty--in every providence of Christian life; and there is also a side that is dark, blurred, or even repugnant. To those who look at the providence from within, sitting in the chamber of faith and peace--it appears in all the colors of heaven; but to those who stand outside, in the winter's cold, and look at it, it appears without one line of loveliness. Only those who behold God as their Father--see the beauty in his providences.

Our Lord in his parable of the Vine and its Branches, tells us two things which ought to help in the interpreting of life's trials. He says that the Father is the gardener, and also that it is the fruitful branches, and not the unfruitful ones, that the gardener prunes.

Afflictions are never in themselves joyous or pleasant. We cannot welcome them into our lives, in the same way that we welcome experiences of gladness; they always give pain, and we cannot enjoy pain. Many of them cut deeply and sorely into our lives. Sometimes our best-loved friends are taken away from us, and our hearts are left bleeding as a vine bleeds when a green branch is cut from it. Sometimes it is loss of property or of money, that tries us, or it may be in sickness or personal suffering, that the chastening consists. In whatever form it comes, the experience is painful. It cannot be otherwise.

"I am the true vine, and My Father is the gardener. . . . He prunes every branch that produces fruit--so that it will produce more fruit." John 15:1-2

Here it is that Christian faith comes in, putting such interpretation and explanation upon the painful things--that we may be ready to accept them with confidence, even with rejoicing. The assurance which our Lord Jesus gives, that the Father is the gardener, if we can but receive it in simplicity, at once puts a gracious and loving aspect on whatever sufferings we are called to endure. Our Father is the gardener; we are branches under his care. He watches over our lives. The afflictions which cut into our very souls, the taking from us of objects that are dear to us, as when the gardener with his sharp knife removes luxuriant branches from the vine, are our Father's prunings. No hand but his--ever holds the knife! We are sure, then, that there is never any careless cutting, any unwise or mistaken pruning, any needless removing of rich branches or growths.

We really need to go no farther than this. A strong, abiding confidence that all the trials, sorrows and losses of our lives are parts of our Father's prunings, ought to silence every question, quiet every fear and give peace and restful assurance to our hearts in all their pain. We cannot know the reason for the painful strokes--but we know that He who holds the priming-knife is our Father! That is all we need to know.

The other thought in the Lord's parable, is scarcely less full of comfort to a Christian. Jesus says it is the fruitful branches that the Father prunes: "He prunes every branch that produces fruit--so that it will produce more fruit."

Afflictions are not, then, a mark of God's anger or disapproval; rather, they are a mark of his favor. They show that the branches into which he cuts, from which he trims away the luxuriant growths, are fruit-bearing already. He does not prune the fruitless branches--he cuts them off altogether as useless, as mere cumberers, absorbing life and yielding nothing of blessing or good. There is no place in the divine kingdom for uselessness. God may let these barren branches alone for a while--they may grow undisturbed even until death--before they are actually cut off. But the Father does not take the trouble to prune them, because it would do no good. These fruitless branches are in Christ only in appearance, not really--and have no true life in them. The wisest and most skillful pruning will never make a lifeless tree or vine, fruitful.

Some Christians have the impression that their many troubles indicate that God does not love them--that they cannot be true Christians, or they would not be so chastened. This word of Christ shows how mistaken they are. The much chastening shows that the Father is pruning his fruitful branch--to make it more fruitful: "All whom the Father loves--He chastens!"

Long ago the writer of one of the Psalms passed through an experience of perplexity when he saw how much less trouble, the men of the world had than he had, though he was faithfully trying to serve God. The record of his experience is valuable to us: "But as for me, my feet almost slipped; my steps nearly went astray. For I envied the arrogant; I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have an easy time until they die, and their bodies are well-fed. They are not in trouble like others; they are not afflicted like most people." Psalm 73:2-5

But the writer passes on to note the result of this absence of trouble or pruning: "Therefore, pride is their necklace, and violence covers them like a garment. Their eyes bulge out from fatness; the imaginations of their hearts run wild. They mock, and they speak maliciously; they arrogantly threaten oppression. They set their mouths against heaven, and their tongues strut across the earth. Look at them--the wicked! They are always at ease, and they increase their wealth!" Psalm 73:6-11

Then there rises up before the Psalmist the contrasted picture of his own life, and the question flashes, "Does it profit to be godly?" "Did I purify my heart and wash my hands in innocence for nothing? For I am afflicted all day long, and punished every morning." Psalm 73:13-14

A little later, however, we hear the solution of the strange perplexity: "When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me--until I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny. Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors!" Psalm 73:16-19

That one escapes the Father's prunings is not, therefore, a mark of peculiar divine love and favor. It is the fruitless branch that is never pruned; the fruitful branch is pruned, and pruned--not by one without skill, not by an enemy--but by the wise Father! Thus we see, how we may rejoice--even in our trials and afflictions! They are tokens that God loves us--that we are already blessed by him in spiritual fruiting--and they remind us that it is because God would lead us to be yet greater blessings, by making us still more fruitful--that he sends the trials.

We get from our Lord's parable also, another word of interpretation; we learn that our Father has a definite object in view in all his prunings: "He prunes every branch that produces fruit--so that it will produce more fruit." One who was altogether ignorant of the art and purpose of pruning, who should see a man with a sharp knife cutting off branch after branch of a luxuriant vine, would at first suppose that the pruner was ruining the vine. So at the time it seems--but by and by, it appears that the prunings have made the vine more fruitful. In the season of vintage, the grapes are more luscious, with a richer flavor in them, because of the cutting away of the superfluous branches.

In like manner, if an angel who had never witnessed anything of human suffering, and who knew nothing of its object, were to see the Father causing pain and affliction to his children, it would seem to him that these experiences could be only destructive of happiness and blessing; but if the angel were to follow those chastened lives on to the end, he would see untold blessing coming out of the chastenings. The Father was but pruning the branches--that they might bear more and better fruit!

"Now the pruning, sharp, unsparing,

Scattered blossom, bleeding shoot;

Afterward, the plenteous bearing

Of the Master's pleasant fruit."

In one of his Psalms, David says, "I had fainted, unless I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord, in the land of the living." He had been passing through many and sore troubles, and so great were his trials that he would have sunk into utter darkness and despair--but for his faith in the goodness of God--which he could not see. Unless he had believed to see the goodness of the Lord--he would have been overwhelmed. There are many times when we can readily discern the divine goodness in our lives--it is manifest all about us, in prosperities and favors which make us glad--but there come other times when the goodness cannot be seen. The home circle is broken; loved ones are taken from us; property melts away; friends fail; health is shattered. The goodness cannot be seen.

Then is the time for Christian faith. We should believe in the goodness we cannot see. We are sure that the goodness is there. God does not send us two classes of providences--one good, and one evil. All are good. Affliction is God's goodness in the seed. It takes time for a seed to grow and to develop into fruitfulness. Many of the best things of our lives come to us first as pain, suffering, earthly loss or disappointment--black seeds, without beauty--but afterward they grow into the rich fruits of righteousness.

God's love toward his children never changes. His will is always mercy and love. Ofttimes there is more divine blessing in the things we regard as evil--than in those we consider good. Pain may be better for us--than pleasure. Loss may have for us greater enriching--than gain. Sorrow may work for us better service--than joy, in the fashioning of Christ's image on our hearts. Misfortune, as we interpret the experience, may bring us infinitely more blessing than the events we write down as fortunate. Our wrecks of earthly hopes, may be in reality--the disclosing to us of rich spiritual possessions unseen before.

In one of our light, thoughtless, superficial words we say, "Seeing is believing." But it is not true; seeing is not believing. Anyone can believe when he sees--but a Christian is to believe when he cannot see. If not, what is the blessing of faith? or what is the gain of being a child of God?

We dishonor our Father if we can believe in his goodness--only when we can see goodness written out in large letters upon the things he gives. Goodness is always wrapped up--even in the most painful experience our Father sends.

We should never lose sight of the divine purpose in all trials--to make our lives more fruitful. Merely getting through troubles with quiet acquiescence, is not all of true Christian endurance: we must seek to get through--as better men and women, with more of the mind and spirit of Christ, loving God and men more. We must see that the pruning makes us more fruitful--that the cutting away of earthly things or of human joys--sends more of our life to spiritual things, and to the bearing of the fruits of righteousness and peace. A sorrow that does us no good--only harms us.

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