

REVERSING LIFE'S REVERSES

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John 16:33

It's only a story, but even so it gives us food for thought. It seems that Satan was holding high court in hell. He was deeply distressed over the growing influence of Christ in human lives and had called his army of imps together to devise some new method of undermining Christians.

It was one of those "brainstorming" sessions when everyone present speaks whatever comes to mind. One particularly aggressive imp suggested they spread the rumor that the Bible is a lie.

"Everybody knows that most of the scientists are on our side," he said. "We'll just get them to make a few earthshaking declarations to the effect that the Bible has been proved untrue, and that should do the trick."

The Devil shook his head.

"No," he said. "That won't work. We tried that long ago. And besides, I'm not so sure that most scientists are on our side anymore."

Another imp got up and said,

"Why don't we make a direct attack on Jesus Christ? If we can only get people to stop believing in Him as the perfect revelation of God—if we can just make them believe He was only a man and a rather ordinary man at that—why pretty soon they won't pay any attention to Him at all."

But the devil vetoed that idea to, saying it had also been tried unsuccessfully.

"The evidence in support of Jesus is so overwhelming," he explained, "every time someone set out to debunk the Christian faith they became a Christian!"

Other imps got up with their suggestions. One said they ought to ridicule the Church—pointing up its faults—focusing on the hypocrites.

“After all,” he pointed out, “everybody knows it isn’t necessary go to church to be a Christian, and if we can just get people to quit supporting the church it will soon die.”

Another imp thought they should start promoting communism with two zeal, and perhaps it would replace Christianity. But the devil turned a deaf ear to those suggestions also on the premise that they, too, had been tried and failed.

It looked as if they weren’t getting very far until a small, rather insignificant imp sitting way in the back, timidly raised his hand and, when asked for his suggestion said,

“Please, your Lowness (I guess that’s what they call the devil), have you thought about discouragement? If we could discourage Christians and dampen their spirits, they would die a natural death.”

With a look of glee, the devil said,

“That’s it! It’s so simple. Why didn’t we think of it before? We’ll just infect each Christian with the virus of discouragement. It’s contagious, you know, and won’t take long to spread.”

Well, like I said, it’s only a story. Or is it? For whether we are

rich or poor,

high or low,

prince or peasant,

we all know what it is to face discouragement. Without a doubt, it is one of Satan’s most effective tools in undermining the saints.

By reducing our spiritual ardor through discouragement,
by dampening our spirits through pessimism,

by neutralize our witness through faintheartedness, the devil is able to devastate us and, as a by-product, weaken the whole body of Christ, the Church.

“Ok,” you say, “you’re coming in on my beacon this morning pastor. I know all about discouragement, but how are Christians—like you and me—supposed to deal with this particular Skeleton In Our closet?”

Well, I suppose we could do what Job was told to do: “Curse God and die.” Lots of people do. Whenever life shifts into reverse they grit their teeth and shake their fist at heaven, blaming God for His unfairness. But the fact of the matter is that few, if any, of our disappointments or discouragements are God-made. On the contrary, most of them are self-made.

I, for one, have lived just long enough to know that God has little, if anything, to do with the difficulties which come to me. They are not His fault, but mine. They are largely the product of my own folly. God is not to blame as all.

I suppose a second thing we could do when discouragement grips us is to just go along with it and, in a spirit of whining resignation take refuge in self-pity, thus permitting this sickness to work its havoc in our soul. I confess that this is the particular pitfall against which I must constantly be on guard. Self-pity: what a dreadful disease it is!

Or, if that doesn’t work, then, of course, we can always run away. We can pretend that our problems do not exist. We can escape into a world of illusion like so many are doing today through alcohol and other means. But sooner or later we have to face reality. We crash—and discover to our dismay—that running away, even for a moment, is no solution to discouragement.

Well, then, how can we succeed in “Reversing Life’s Reverses?” How can we overcome discouragements and conquer our difficulties? I certainly don’t pretend to offer a full and final

answer this morning. I'm so brash—and you are not so naive—as to believe that a simple set of seven steps to trouble-free living can be given, let alone be observed.

But even so, I believe there is an answer to discouragement, for where human words have a hollow ring, the word of God rings true. And Jesus had something important to say about the difficulties,

disappointments and

discouragements of life.

If we have the good sense to listen to Him, we can take a mighty step toward joyous and victorious living.

The particular passage I'm thinking of right now is the last half of John 16:33.

“In the world you have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.”

It seems to me there are three things Jesus is suggesting to those of us who are determined to succeed in “Reversing Life's Reverses.” He's saying we must learn to Think Right, Act Right and Believe Right. Let's look at each of these suggestions separately. First—

Think Right

“In the world you have tribulation,” He said, so don't be surprised when it comes. Expect it. What Jesus was talking about is our basic approach to discouragement—our way of thinking about what life does or does not do to us. He didn't say the Christian life would be a bowl of cherries. Instead, He said

discouragement,

difficulty and

disappointment

will be part of the scene and as Christians we are not immune to them. We have not been hermetically sealed inside some sort of invisible shield which protects us from the buffeting of life.

“In the world you have tribulation,” Jesus said. Expect it!

In his book, How To Stop Worrying And Start Living, Andrew Carnegie suggests that one of

the ways to overcome discouragement is to cooperate with the inevitable.

He wasn't suggesting that we become fatalists. He was simply pointing out that there are some things in life we cannot change, and we might as well admit it.

There are some experiences we cannot avoid.

There are some loads we cannot escape.

They are part of life, so let's accept them. Let's cooperate with the inevitable. That's exactly what Jesus was saying in a different way 1900 years before Andrew Carnegie was born. "*In the world you have tribulation.*"

Now when we begin to look at life from this Christian point of view—

when we position ourselves with the thought in mind that there are some problems

we just can't avoid, because Jesus said so—

then we begin to see the possibilities which lie hidden within those problems. For as someone has said so well,

"Life consists of endless possibilities cleverly disguised as seemingly insurmountable problems."

Let me show you what I mean. Charles Edison, the famous son of an even more famous father, tells how one night his dad lost over two million dollars in a manner of minutes. The great Edison Industries of West Orange, New Jersey, were almost entirely destroyed by fire, and much of Thomas Edison's work went up in smoke.

He was 67 years old at the time and young Charles Edison, who was 24, was sure his father would die of a broken heart, that he was just too old to start again. He rushed frantically through the crowd watching the fire, searching for his dad. When he finally found him, Charles saw him standing near the blaze, his face aglow, his white hair blowing in the winter wind.

Charles Edison said,

“I didn’t know what he was going to do. He was 67—no longer a young man—and everything was going up in flames. Suddenly he saw me and yelled, ‘Charlie, go home and find your mother. Bring her here. She’ll never see a fire as big as this one as long as she lives!’”

The next morning young Charles walked with his father through the charred embers of the older man’s dreams. As he wondered what he could say to soften the blow, his father turned and said, “Son, there’s a great value in disaster. All of our mistakes have been burned up. Thank God, we can start fresh tomorrow.” Within three weeks Thomas Edison turned out his first phonograph! He succeeded in “Reversing Life’s Reverses” by Thinking Right.

Instead of cursing God,
instead of indulging in self-pity,
instead of trying to run away and hide—

he faced up to the fact that sometimes life is made up of tragedies, disappointments and shattered dreams, but even so, every cloud has a silver lining for the children of God, because the Bible says::

“All things work together for good to them that love God.”

He knew that the Lord with whom he had walked for nearly 70 years would not forsake him as he came to the end of the journey.

I’ve often referred to J. B. Phillips’ beautiful translation of the New Testament. It’s a wonderful devotional resource because he has a way of illuminating obscure verses which helps drive their message deep into your heart. Here’s how he translates James 1:2-3:

*“When all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives, my brothers,
don’t resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends! Realize that they
come
to test your faith and to produce in you the quality of endurance.”*

Doesn’t that sing! The exigencies of life are not enemies unless you make them so. They can be

friends. They can become the very means through which God brings a blessing into your life.

“In the world you have tribulation,” Jesus said. Expect it.

Don't run away from it.

Don't let it fill your soul with rancor.

Don't blame it all on God! Think Right!!

Learn to look for the possibility which lies buried within the difficulty. Learn to see every problem as an opportunity—every present burden as a future blessing—for therein lies the initial key to “Reversing Life's Reverses.”

And then, if we're going to succeed in overcoming discouragement we must not only Think Right, we must --

Act Right

“In the world you have tribulation,” said Jesus, “but be of good cheer.”

“Be” is a verb and denotes action, or in this case “a state of being.” Jesus is saying act as if it were so: “Be of good cheer!” Stop sniveling and start smiling! Even if you don't feel like sinking—sing! Get busy cheerfully do something creative about your discouragement.

Thomas Edison not only saw the opportunity which lay buried in his discouragement—

he not only thought right, he acted right—

he made the best of what he had and with God's help his best was good enough.

And so it will be with you, my friend. God's blessing added to your human best is what it takes to begin “Reversing Life's Reverses.”

Louis Armstrong, who is affectionately known as “Satchmo,” made an interesting comment which was quoted in the Readers Digest a while back:

“The Lord helps the poor, but He don't help the lazy!”

I believe that's true. We have to put muscle behind our prayers if we expect them to have any power, for James 1:17 says: “*Faith without works is dead.*” And I believe the good Lord expects

us to work as if everything depends upon us at the very moment we are praying in the knowledge that everything depends upon Him.

Over in Leichester, England, there is a church which is over 300 years old. It is a beautiful spot. An architectural gem. Just inside the entry hangs a plaque which reads:

“When everything Holy was, throughout the land, being destroyed or profaned, this church was built to be glory of God by Sir Robert Shirley whose singular praise it was to have done the best of things in the worst of times.”

“That’s the spirit I want,” Jesus seems to say. “Be of good cheer. Learn to do the best things in the worst times. Anyone can complain about the things which can’t be done. I want you to get busy cheerfully doing the things which can be done.”

“In the world you have tribulation, but be of good cheer I have overcome the world.”

If we’re going to succeed in “Reversing Life’s Reverses” not only must we Think Right, which is to say, not only must we take a creative attitude towards discouragement, we must also Act Right. We must launch out by faith and, in a spirit of daring, attempt something great for God and through God to solve our discouragement.

Once again, let me show you what I mean. Just one year ago today a woman sat in this very church with a king-size case of discouragement. Her husband was desperately ill and yet there didn’t seem to be anyway in the world they could move to a climate where he would have a chance to get better.

Everything was stacked against them.

But, as she listened that morning she heard her pastor say,

“Come at your problems with a logical plan of attack. Select the best answer to your problem and then get busy! God will never do for you

what you can do for yourself.”

Well, she went home and began to think seriously about what she had heard. That night she woke up in the midnight hours and began to think about an idea for Christmas decorations she had had for a long time but, like so many of us, had done nothing about. She decided right then and there that with God's help she would do something to lick the cause of her discouragement.

She made a few of those decorations—took them down to a decorators' show at the Merchandise Mart and stoled the show! Within a few weeks she had received orders totaling many thousands of dollars. Before long she had everybody in the family busy making Christmas decorations. As a result, Mrs. J. F. Reilly, one of our own members, will soon sell her home and move her fine new business to Arkansas where her husband's health will have an opportunity to improve. All glory goes to God!

Make no mistake about it, folks, life is full of discouragements and detours.
But that doesn't mean hope is dead!

“Be of good cheer,” Jesus said, “I have overcome the world.”

And so can you, my friend, with His help.

Some time ago I was called out of a meeting to answer an emergency telephone call. The man on the other end of the line had a gun and was threatening to shoot himself. I talked to him on the phone for more than two hours—helped calm him down—got him to unload the gun and then hurried over to his home to see him.

Now this poor fellow was in a lot of trouble. He was at the end of his rope.

His family was gone.

His money was gone.

His self-respect was gone.

He was head over heels in debt and was having a problem with alcohol. But even so, life wasn't hopeless. And I told him so.

It was obvious that his main problem was spiritual. So he began by getting right with God. After that we took him to a doctor who confirmed everything I had said about the ruin that lay ahead if he kept on drinking. When the light finally dawned, he climbed on the wagon and hasn't had a drink since.

Then he began to figure out the things he could do to remove the cause of his discouragement. As always, real friends came to his aid. He was able to refinance his debts. He got an extra job and, with a little patience and understanding, the difficulties which had driven a wedge down the center of his home were bridged and his family got together again.

He moved to another community where there were better work opportunities, and I didn't see him for several years. And then, just a few weeks ago, he showed up in church one Sunday morning with his wife and children. It was clear from our brief chat that this fellow who, a few years ago was so discouraged he was ready to kill himself, was living a happy, normal, useful and creative Christian life. Again, all glory to God!

"In this world you have tribulation," said Jesus, "but be of good cheer."

Act Right! Look for the opportunity which lies buried in the difficulty. And when you find it, do everything you can to

"work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil.2:12).

And then, there's a third thought we need to put in place if we would succeed in "Reversing Life's Reverses." Not only must we Think Right and Act Right,

but most important of all, we must --

Believe Right!

"In this world you have tribulation," said Jesus, "but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

And there's the crux of it all. There's the secret of our victory. There's the source of our strength. There's the place of our power. For you see, my friend, the burden is not on us, but on Jesus who has overcome the world. He has already gained the victory. All we have to do is claim the spoils.

If you and I had to face the discouragements of life without Him and didn't Believe Right, we couldn't begin to Think Right, let alone Act Right. It's Christ's victory which makes it all possible. For when we surrender our lives to Him, not only do we gain a great salvation, we also gain a share in every victory He has won!

"I am come to give you life and that more abundant," He said.

"Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

"Because I live, you shall live also."

We are not only partakers in His resurrection, we are also partners in

His power over sin.

His victory over disease.

His conquest over death.

Whether it's the "black" death which sends our body to be grave, or the "white" death which grips our soul when discouragement rolls in and life comes tumbling down.

"Because I live you shall live also," said Jesus.

My victory is your victory.

My power is your power.

My triumph is your triumph.

The Christian life is meant to be an overcoming life. If it's anything less that, it's because we haven't appropriated and put to use the resources which Christ has placed at our disposal.

When we become Christians, Jesus not only "takes" something from us: our sin. He also "gives" something to us: His power. And all we need is a sensitive spiritual thermometer which will turn on the stimulating warmth of that power whenever the winds of life begin to blow too harshly and cold. I don't know of

any better advice,

any greater wisdom or

any more successful way

of "Reversing Life's Reverses" than that which is found in this little poem called

--

Rules For Daily Living

"Begin the day with God,
Kneel down to Him in prayer;
Lift up thy heart to His abode
And seek His love to share.

"Open the Book of God,
And read a portion there;
That it may hallow all thy thoughts
And sweeten all thy care.

"Go through the day with God,
Whate'er thy work may be;
Where'er thou art, at home, abroad,

He still is near to thee.

“Converse in mind with God,
Thy spirit heavenward raise;
Acknowledge every good bestowed,
And offer grateful praise.

“Conclude thy day with God,
Thy sins to him confess;
Trust in the Lords' atoning blood,
And plead His righteousness.

“Lie down at night with God,
Who gives His servants sleep;
And when thou tread'st the vale of death
He will thee guard and keep.”

“In the world you have tribulation,” said Jesus, “but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” And so can you!

There's no reason why you shouldn't share the victory which Christ has won, my friend. The way is very simple: Think Right. Act Right. Believe Right.

Think Right. Begin by taking a new approach to discouragement and, “*When trials and temptations flood your life, don't resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends.*”

Act Right. Get busy cheerfully doing what you can to improve your lot, remembering that God will never do for you what you can do for yourself.

Believe Right. Place your trust implicitly in Him. For in the last analysis:

"This is the victory that overcomes the world -- even our faith" (1 John 5:4).

This morning you can share the victory of Christ. Through Him you, too, can be "more than

conqueror." Just open your heart to be One to said:

"In the world you have tribulation, but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world."

And as Jesus takes the place of prominence in your life, you'll discover that through Him you, too,

"can do all things." You can even succeed in "Reversing Life's Reverses."