

Sermon for Sunday, September 1, 1974, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"HOW NOT TO TRIP OVER TROUBLE"

Genesis 50:15-21

Text: "As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today."  
Genesis 50:20

Our sermon this morning deals with one of the most common and inevitable facts of human existence, the problem of tripping over trouble. The question is not so much how to avoid trouble, but how not to trip over it when it comes. As Longfellow once expressed it, "Thy fate is the common fate of all, into each life some rain must fall." Those of us who belong to the over forty crowd can remember the Mills Brothers singing "Into Each Life Some Rain Must Fall".

Actually, our problem with trouble is twofold. The first part of the problem has to do with the very fact of trouble, and it raises a philosophical question at least as old as mankind, a question which is brought sharply into focus in the book of Job. That question is, why do we have trouble at all? Does it mean that God is punishing us? Does it mean that God has withdrawn his favor; that he no longer cares for us nor loves us? Or worse still, does it mean God is unable to help us?

For example, the Bible tells us that when Joseph was first carried into Egypt he was bought by Potiphar, a captain of the Guard of Pharaoh. The Bible goes on to add that "The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man." (Gen. 39:2). But when Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, was the Lord not with him then? And when through the anger of Potiphar's wife he is cast into prison, was God not with him then?

Let me confess quite frankly that while there are numerous answers given to this problem, none of them are completely satisfactory. For example, the Bible tells us, "For whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth." (Heb. 12:5,6) Or again, "As many as I love I rebuke and chasten." (Rev. 3:19) Yet, when we are caught up in the grip of some agonizing trouble, we could wish the Lord did not love us so much.

Again, we are told that sin is the cause of all our troubles. And since, as Paul puts it, "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," we are the makers of our own adversity. Somehow the fault of trouble and sorrow and affliction is our own. Yet, if trouble has no deeper significance than that, the finite fumbling of our own spiritual ineptness, how futile and hopeless life really is.

There are others who say that trouble is a training school, the anvil upon which character is hammered out. As E. H. Chapin puts it, "the brightest crowns that are worn in heaven have been tried and smelted and polished and glorified through the furnace of tribulation." Or, again, as the great preacher Spurgeon once said, "There are no crown wearers in heaven that were not cross bearers here below." Yet, when our hearts are burdened with sorrow and our eyes dimmed with grief, how little we care that our character is being refined and shaped and molded.

Let us admit then, that while all of these ideas about adversity have weight and merit, none of them are completely satisfactory. Perhaps, after all, we can only take our stand where Job did. He did not understand nor comprehend the tragedy that had enveloped his life. Yet, in the firm assurance that existence was not senseless and meaningless, he cried out in faith, "I know that my redeemer liveth."

So our first problem with trouble is that of seeing rhyme or reason behind it. At this point a man reaches out in faith to grasp the assurance that life does have meaning, or else he goes spinning off into the desolate pits of despair where there is no hope.

The second problem we have with trouble is how to keep from tripping over it when it comes. Since the life of Joseph as it is recorded in the Bible so beautifully illustrates what to do with trouble, let us use him as our example. I would have you notice in the first place that Joseph saw reality as it was. Although his own brothers had sold him into slavery, in the years that followed Joseph never hated them nor sought revenge. Why was this? Was it not at least in part that he saw reality as it was--that he realized he himself had been much to blame for their attitude toward him? Nowhere do we find Joseph shaking his fist at heaven and cursing his cruel fate; nowhere do we find Joseph sinking into self-pity and sniveling complaint. Rather, in each calamity that befell him we find Joseph squarely facing it and seeing it for what it was.

And is not seeing reality for what it is one of our greatest problems? I have a friend who has a little child who is mentally retarded and that family simply could not accept the fact that that child had brain damage. They went from child doctor to child psychiatrist to hospital to medical center trying to get somebody to say to them that it wasn't so. Their refusal to face the reality of the tragedy in their lives almost destroyed them. The whole field of psychiatry has developed because you and I are not able to see reality as it is. Many of us are unable to face squarely the harsh realities of life.

I was reading yesterday in the Sunday magazine of the Globe Democrat about Evel Knievel. He is the one who is going to jump Snake Canyon on a motorcycle. They were interviewing him and asking him about his youth and so on and he was talking about growing up in the town of Butte, Montana. He said, "If you grew up with the gang I did, the thing you wanted to be was a pimp or thief. I became both. The period of lawlessness I went through was really a period of not growing up, not being able to face reality. One day, I looked in the mirror and I just said to myself, I'll lose my wife and kids...I'll be in the slammer for the rest of my life if I don't dummy up and do what's right. I decided to do that. It was a little tough for a while." Yes, facing up to reality as it is may be tough for a little while.

Our mental institutions and hospitals are simply unable to keep pace with the rapidly growing number of people who need mental therapy. And who are all of these people needing help? They are people who have been unable in some way to cope with the realities of life. They have discovered that the adversities of life are simply too much for them and they have escaped to some illusionary sanctuary of the mind where there is no reality.

A young alcoholic who was the son of one of my Deacons in the church I served in Dallas once talked to me and told me why he drank. He said, "I drink until a little switch in my mind snaps and the whole world changes. Then I'm not afraid anymore." Then I got a letter from his father this past Christmas--the young man was then 35--and had taken his own life. Here is a person who thinks something is wrong with his body. He does not go to the doctor for fear the doctor will find something wrong, and he pretends everything is all right. Then, when it is too late because he was afraid to face reality, trouble has destroyed him.

Many of us are like this. We come to a despairing place in life and it seems so difficult that we want to deny its existence--we want to pretend it isn't so. Perhaps you have known people in your own experience who through some tragedy such as the death of a loved one have refused to face up to the adversity of life. They hide behind a mask of grief and spend their days living in the past, refusing to accept the realities of life. I know of a couple who lost their little son through illness. For many, many months they refused to admit the reality of life, they refused to face up to adversity. The child's toys were left in the yard where he had dropped them last. His little room was left just as it was when last he slept there. Any little hand print, any little evidence of his presence was left. The parents were trying so very hard to pretend it wasn't so and it almost destroyed them as they tripped over trouble.

The first step, then, in learning how not to trip over trouble is to see reality as it is. Trouble, affliction, and sorrow can never be handled as long as we will not face it squarely. The second step in not tripping over trouble is seeking good in the midst of it. Great disaster had befallen Joseph when his brothers sold him into slavery into a strange and distant land. Great misfortune was his when he was unjustly cast into prison. Yet, in spite of the great adversities of his life, in time to come Joseph could look back across the years and see the hand of God. To his brothers he said, "God sent me before you to preserve posterity in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So now it was not you that sent me hither, but God."

Isn't this something of what St. Paul meant when he wrote, "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him..." Paul himself had been taken prisoner and shipped off to Rome to be unjustly held. Yet, there he speaks of the conversion of the servants of the household of Caesar himself. In the midst of adversity he could see life working for good.

Back during the early days of the Reformation, a great persecution occurred in England and many brave Christians were burned at the stake. Among them were two great men, Bishop Latimer and Ridley. When the blazing faggot was laid at Ridley's feet, Latimer cried out, "Be of good comfort, Brother Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out." There in the worst of adversity as he offered his own life for his faith, Bishop Latimer saw his sacrifice as a witness to the world, a candle that would never be put out and he found it very good.

Do you see? In the worst of calamity and disaster we can find some good for God's purpose is shining through. At his death Joseph said to his brothers, "As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good." As he looked back across the years he could see the divine purpose of God shining through. And when we know that--when we know that adversity cannot separate us from God's love and from God's purpose, then we can cry out with St. Paul, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?....No, in all these things we are more than conquerors."

Let us notice finally what Joseph did with the trouble in his life. What happened when Joseph became a slave to Potiphar? Why he soon became the overseer of his household! What happened when Joseph was cast into prison? Why he became a trustee to the prison keeper. And what happened when Joseph became a servant to the Pharaoh? Why he became a ruler of the land, second only to the Pharaoh himself.

Do you see? Joseph used adversity as a stepping stone to something greater, something better. Just before graduation from Annapolis, Richard E. Byrd broke his foot. Somehow it never healed properly and he was discharged from the navy as a cripple. His hopes of being a naval officer were smashed and he said, "I thought for a long time it was the end of everything." Yet, in spite of his adversity he applied to Washington for duty as a student aviator on the grounds that "a pilot sits down most of the time." He fought in the war as an aviator, flew to the North Pole, hopped the Atlantic Ocean, and twice flew over the South Pole. His feats repeatedly brought him to the attention of Congress and many foreign countries bestowed honor upon him. He used adversity as a stepping stone.

Has not this always been true of great men? In the fourth century Augustine fell into mental anguish, but through pain he became one of Christ's great saints. Whistler, the artist, wanted to be a soldier but failed at West Point because he could not pass chemistry. He once said, "If silicon had been a gas, I should have been a major-general." But with his failure he turned to painting and became one of America's greatest. Or take for example Phillips Brooks, perhaps the greatest preacher America has ever had. He desperately wanted to be a school teacher. But he wrote of his scholars, "They are the most disagreeable set of creatures without exception that I have ever met with...I really am ashamed of it, but I am tired, cross and almost dead..." After he lost his position he wrote, "I don't know what will become of me and I don't care much." Yet, in spite of his disappointment, he used his adversity as a stepping stone and rose to fame as a great pulpiteer.

Those who conquer in life are those who are able to rise above adversity and use it as a stepping stone to something better. Kathryn Marshall was overwhelmed by the tragedy that struck her when her husband died. Yet she arose from despair to use her adversity and grief to give the world a heart-warming book like A Man Called Peter. Oscar Wilde once said, "Where there is sorrow, there is holy ground." What is holy ground? Is it not a place where God is? Is it not such a ground as Moses stood upon with his shoes in his hand, a place where God not only was, but where God also sent Moses on to newer, higher and greater deeds? Indeed, trouble can be a holy ground, a place where God is and a place where God bids us climb on to newer and greater things. I think of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and Gethsemane was holy ground because there Jesus met God face to face as he wrestled over Calvary and he went on from that holy ground to give his life on the cross and there to achieve the salvation of the world.

Yes, "Thy fate is the common fate of all, Into each life some rain must fall." Explain trouble? Well, we really cannot. But in faith we can learn how not to trip over it. We can learn first to see reality as it really is without running or hiding from it; we can learn to seek the good that is in the midst of trouble for we know God's purpose is shining through; and we can use adversity as a holy ground, a stepping stone to greater things. God grant that when you and I reach the end of life's road and we stand there at the end, God grant that we can look back across the years and we can say with Joseph, "God meant it for good..."