

A Second Lenten Meditation

Our Walk With Christ

As we approach the last week of our Lord's life prior to His suffering, death, and resurrection, we are aware as we read the Gospel accounts how evermore serious and dire the character of this stage of His journey is becoming. It is a climax that has been building throughout the latter portion of His three years of preaching, teaching, and miracles. The beginning period of His public ministry had contained many far easier and more palatable scenes. There was the adulation of the crowds, the thrill of His disciples in their new recruitment, the excitement and awe of witnessing firsthand His great works, and teaching offered with power and authority. But all of this is being supplanted by a grimness and soberness that is everywhere. The audiences dwindle: *From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him* (Jn. 6:66). A sense of discouragement and bewilderment replaces the early confidence and optimism of those who yet remain steadfast with Him.

All of this very much brings to mind the reality of Lent, and the experience of our Christian lives, at large. We would imagine that proximity with Christ, as it increases in intimacy and familiarity, will bring with it expanded seasons of of something we had always longed for: heavenly peace, a foretaste of eternity, relief from that sphere of life in this world that imprisons and confines others because of their unbelief. Since we have, through faith in Jesus, been brought in some manner into His inner circle, we assume there will be benefits. We are no longer "out", after all, but "in". We dare to hope for special treatment. And indeed, it is granted. But as this mysterious process called discipleship matures, we find the way harder, even very much more so. The headwinds pick up in intensity. The glimpses of sunshine through the racing clouds are much fewer, and they are gone before they can offer much help. And when we look ahead in faith to behold the the One in whose path we follow, His expression has changed: *And it came to pass , when the time was come that he should be received up, he stedfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem* (Luke 9:51).

In that particular season of our walk with Christ, things are critical, and there is a very real reason. The Gospel seed that had yielded a brief spurt of hopeful growth at first, failing to put down strong roots that can endure those forces that will inevitably assail it, never matures. Disillusionment gives way to abandonment. That which had failed to produce returns at the rate and quantity matching our expectations is rejected as a bad investment. We join the ranks of the victims weeping on one another's shoulders who claim they had not been properly and fairly informed prior to their commitment of what the cost would actually be. The world is full of this self-pitying chorus, so there's plenty of good company. Discarded faith experiences, repudiated marriages, rejected employments, friendships gone bad. O, how full are the air-waves with such

tales, and how much we love to hear them! We conclude in good conscience, “Now I have a good excuse to do nothing, because that’s just what everyone else is doing!”

Will ye also go away? cries Jesus to the Twelve (Jn. 6:67), following one of His most controversial discourses which had sent the vast bulk of His listeners running off into the darkness in fear and disgust. And what about you and me? How much will we endure, how much will we accept of what our resentful and angry hearts falsely represent to us as just plain abuse from our stern Master? But this is His hard dealing, and it is reserved for those who can take it. It comes on unremittingly, through circumstances, through illness, through aging bodies, through career and financial disappointments, through a desolation of spirit that seems to endure for years. It goes way, way past the point of the comfortable and predictable, and takes us into very unfamiliar territory where there is nothing to hold on to but faith itself. And even our grip on that is perilously weak and wavering. This is called the Christian life. Anything else receiving that same designation but representing itself in different terms is false. Anything suggesting shortcuts, spiritual anesthetics and pain-relievers, escalators and elevators and easier means of ascent up the mountain of God, are lies. They arise from those who have no idea what they are talking about.

The only requirement from our end of it is fidelity. Don’t quit. Don’t turn back. And if you do, find some way, as soon as you can, to resume. The means of conveyance, the power to endure, the actuality of reaching the goal, are not within your power or mine to produce. They are the gift of God. But you will be withheld at times from clearly perceiving that they are in place. It is at such times that faith proves itself at its heroic best. “You did it!” cries the voice at the end of the race. “But I had no idea what I did...!” you return.

Now faith is hardly unaided: *So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God* (Romans 10:17). We ready ourselves for conflict by exercises in fitness, and in the spiritual realm, this means availing ourselves of the faith training mechanisms provided in God’s Word. These are His promises. Think of a few of them:

-There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able ; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it. (1 Cor. 10:13)

-I am with you alway , even unto the end of the world. Amen. (Matt. 28:20)

-... he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ. (Phillip. 1:6)

But how will these, and a host of others, benefit you, if you do not know them? You will need them, if you intend to survive. No one is strong enough to endure without them. Here, earthly might and main completely fail.

What is the endpoint? *Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go ? thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the*

living God (Jn. 6:68). To whom shall you and I go for the words of eternal life? As much as we love our lives here, as much as we respect and appreciate this Creation which is the work of His hands, as attached as we are to the familiar realm where our lives, through all the seasons they contain, are lived out, we have heard the vague hints of a melody which knows no source among us to which it can be traced. We have caught just the faintest glimpse of a land which gathers up into itself all the very best of anything we have ever known or even imagined within our present experience, which promises a context where those things will find their fulfillment and complete expression.

But we are still here, and the journey is far from over. The best we can do is to fortify ourselves against the next form of opposition to our progress. The great, dark shape of the Cross, casting its stark shadow across the landscape of our lives, is yet the main operative factor in them. It calls us to share in our Lord's experience. He, after all, has taken the much, much greater part. He asks us only to contribute that portion of our share in His sufferings to which He has assigned each of us.

Is that too much to request?

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.