

"PRIVILEGE TO LIVE"

Scripture Lesson - Isaiah 40:28-31

Text - Isaiah 40:31 "But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint."

Two men between thirty and forty years of age were walking down a city street at the close of a hard business day. They were tired in body, tired in spirit, and their eyes were dull and heavy. Presently as they shuffled along they met a certain elderly gentleman with whom they were both well acquainted. He was well past seventy, but still actively engaged in business, and....strange as it might seem....at the close of this day, as at the close of practically every day, they found him lively as a cricket. There was a merry twinkle in his eye, and there was something in his voice which suggested an undiminished vitality. "How in the world do you do it?", one of the younger men asked him quite frankly. "Here we are at half your age, worn out, fed up with everything, and seeing nothing ahead but a tiresome continuation of the daily grind; while here you are, making no more money than either of us, and with your full share of troubles, but getting a thrill out of life and feeling like a schoolboy anxious to get into a game. Doesn't anything ever get you down? Don't you ever get tired of it all?" The old man chuckled a bit, but there was a serious light in his eye as he told them, "Yes, my body often gets tired. In fact, it's very tired now. But a man's spirit never gets tired as long as he is wholeheartedly grateful for the privilege of living."

A man's spirit never gets tired as long as he is wholeheartedly grateful for the privilege of living. But immediately this raises another question: "Is it being realistic, is it being completely honest to think of life primarily in terms of a privilege? (Especially in our middle and later years, when troubles for the average person seem to multiply at an ever-increasing rate) Considering all the vexations and frustrations and ailments and heartaches that go to make up our brief tenure upon this earth, would it not be closer to the truth to say that, except perhaps for a sheltered and selected few, life amounts to little more than a daily grind, to be endured as gracefully as possible until such time as we are summoned to take our Journey to that Great Beyond, from which no traveller returns. And when, in this particular day, one ~~man~~ ponders the grim and ever-present possibilities of atomic warfare and other possible desolations too horrible for words, just where does this idea of "privilege" enter into what we call living? What is there for which to be grateful?

Obviously the answer to this whole question....and, mind you, it is a real question in the minds of many....hinges upon two things: First, what should constitute the supreme privilege involved in living, so far as man is concerned? Second, if we are to be grateful for that privilege, toward whom should such gratitude be felt and expressed? Since these two questions overlap to a great extent, suppose we take them together. And I know of no words more fitting with which to begin our answer than that famous opening statement of the Shorter Catechism of our Presbyterian Church: "Man's chief end (or purpose, or reason for being) is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever." Lasting gratitude for the privilege of living, irrespective of one's physical or economic or social circumstances, depends first and foremost upon a sense of daily fellowship with a personal God. And that in turn depends upon the extent to which you are willing to line up your own life....no matter what the cost may be.... in terms of His purposes for you as an individual and in terms of His purposes for the world at large. Unless that is your paramount mission in life, whatever you may be required to do to earn a physical livelihood, then sooner or later you are destined to a boredom and discontent and bitterness and self-pity that will drag you deeper and

deeper into its stifling embrace. Make no mistake about it, the surest way to become "fed up" with everything is to make self and self-interest the center of your picture. But when, on the other hand, God is your center, when you have that realization..... which Jesus so clearly pointed out.....that we are not His servants, but His friends, that we are co-laborers with His in the most important business of the whole world, then no amount of trials and tribulations and afflictions can smother the abiding happiness within your soul or destroy your abiding zeal for life. Few men have ever suffered as the prophet Isaiah was called upon to suffer for his religious convictions. Physical tortures which lasted for years, and which culminated (according to the best of tradition) in his being literally sawed in two by the order of a godless king; social humiliation, insults of every description, spiritual anguish of the most intense variety; and yet it was this same Isaiah, obviously referring to his own experience, who gave us those thrilling words of our text for today: "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint." Or, as the Apostle Paul said many centuries later, having suffered everything that his implacable enemies could hurl in his direction: "For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth nor anything else shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Let me say again, it is only in that spirit that you can have an adequate conception of the privilege of living, and the type of zeal which is produced only by that conception.

Indeed it is that very attitude which has for its direct result other traits of character which also make for a continuing enthusiasm in life. One of these traits might be called.....with apologies to Webster.....that of "teachability". Not only the willingness, but the eagerness, which the true Christian always has to learn better ways of doing his Master's will and furthering all major purposes related thereto. Notice I say "true Christian", because unfortunately there are far too many people who seem to think they absorbed a lifetime supply of religion back in their childhood days....as the one's Christianity could be a sort of "deep freeze" proposition...and who have completely lost their zeal for any further spiritual wisdom or any broader applications of God's truth. In all kindness, and yet with all emphasis, one is forced to say that no such person can claim to be glorifying God, for Christianity always has been and always must be a vital, wide-awake, progressive religion, or else it becomes an insult to the very Master whose name it bears. Nor is this warning to be sounded strictly for the benefit of the older generation, for after all "teachability" is basically an attitude of the heart and not a matter of age. In fact, we have too often seen young people whose minds were more rigidly closed to the reception of truth....especially where it might interfere with their notions of a good time.....than were the minds of their fathers and grandfathers before them. The story of the high school graduate who was attending a formal dinner several weeks after receiving her diploma is a case in point. The dinner was a large-scale public affair, and the girl was unaware that she was seated next to a very noted astronomer. But, anxious to make conversation.....for silence was one thing her so-called mind simply couldn't stand.....she turned to the impressive-looking stranger and said in a casual tone: "Sir, what do you do for a living?" "I happen to study astronomy", was the modest reply. "Really!", answered the sweet young thing, with a carefully studied air of sophistication, "Why I finished astronomy when I was a sophomore." Bad enough as such a blinded attitude may be when it applies only to the so-called "secular" pursuits, it is nothing less than stark tragedy when it affects the all-important matter of man's relationship to God. And yet there are those...and their name is legion.....who actually think they completed their lifetime course in Christian truth and Christian responsibility when they graduated from the Primary Department. May God in His mercy open their eyes!

A second logical result of this higher conception of the purpose of life is closely related to what we have just mentioned. It is a consuming interest in the present and the future, on the part of the individual, no matter what his age may happen to be. In other

words, with all due appreciation of what has taken place in the past (for no life can be rightly balanced without such a feeling), he nevertheless lives for today and tomorrow...rather than for yesterday. Unfortunately there are too many of whom that cannot be said, as Jerome K. Jerome implied when he observed that people have been talking about the "good old days of fifty years ago" ever since Adam had his fifty-first birthday. And while it must be assumed that a certain amount of nostalgic reminiscing must be expected from anyone who has lived for any considerable number of years...and, within reasonable limits, there is no objection to it.....nevertheless when it is carried too far, its dangers from the Christian standpoint are glaringly evident. Amusing, perhaps, and yet loaded with food for thought, is this bit of verse which some unknown rhymester has produced:

O, the lightning bug is brilliant,
But he hasn't any mind;
For he blunders through existence
With his headlight on behind.

About a week ago in a downtown cafeteria I enjoyed a most stimulating conversation with a man approximately eighty years of age. His immediate family have all passed away, and for the past ten years he has lived here in San Antonio all alone in a cheap, third-rate hotel room, which is the best that his meager pension will afford. He had several very obvious physical handicaps, and in the course of conversation he mentioned several other hopeless diseases from which he suffers. He didn't speak of them in any spirit of complaint....as is usually the case....but simply in reply to my own questions and without any undue elaboration. He went on to mention that within the past few years he had become an active member of a certain church in our city, and in a heart-to-heart fashion he told of how much that Christian fellowship and inspiration was meaning to him in his declining years. I did not mention to him that I was a minister, for I wanted him to do the talking without feeling that he was under any indirect "pressure" from me to say the "proper" thing. And then a moment later he said something that thrilled me through and through. Having summed up all his limitations and afflictions, he said with a smile on his face, "But if the Lord is willing, I want to go on living. I'm very much interested in this world and I want to see what can be done with it." A ~~yes~~ spirit like that will not down. "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength."

And now this closing thought. They that have a true appreciation of life's purpose, in its God-given terms, have also the most adequate appreciation of the worth and dignity of their fellow-beings; consequently the greatest joy in their associations. Again and again has it been said, but it cannot be said too often, that a knowledge of the Fatherhood of God is the only true foundation for a lasting brotherhood of man. Other incentives have been tried, but sooner or later they have always failed. A mutual desire for profits is not enough. A mutual desire for learning, for recreation, for scientific achievement, and for various other objectives, is alright as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough. For it is all based upon self-interest, and wherever that is the controlling aim, you will inevitably find those who want to be on top of the heap, at the expense of everyone else; and in the long run they themselves will end up being miserable. But wherever you find a man or a woman with the love of God in his heart, and with the welfare of his fellow-man deep in his soul, there you will find a happy individual, no matter what may be his age or his physical limitations, and...what is more...there you will find the only living example of real democracy.

In the course of the Revolutionary War, while preparations were under way for a certain impending battle, a man in ~~stripped~~ civilian clothes passed a corporal who was arrogantly ordering his men to lift a heavy wooden beam. When it was obvious that more help was needed, the civilian ventured to ask the corporal, "Why don't you help them yourself?" "Sir," was the indignant reply, "I'll have you know I'm a corporal." With a muttered apology, the civilian stripped off his coat and pitched it to help the soldiers get the job done. Finally, when it was completed, he turned to the corporal and said, "Now, Mr. Corporal, whenever you haven't enough men to do a job, call on your commander-in-chief." And before the astonished corporal could reply, George Washington picked up his coat and left. Quite a contrast to the attitude displayed not long ago by a Manhattan subway

rider who was asked by a stranger if he knew the name of a particular station at which the train was then stopping. "Sorry, I don't", replied the commuter. "I've been riding this line for fifteen years, but I only know two stops; the one where I get on and the one where I get off." Multiply that spirit a million or ten million or twenty million times, in the more vital concerns of life, and you will have one of the biggest reasons behind the unhappiness, the selfish anxiety, and the cold indifference that is rotting out the very roots of our national life today.

A man's spirit never gets tired as long as he is wholeheartedly grateful for the privilege of living. Do you have that unconquerable zeal in your own heart? Do you wish that you did have it? Then let's go back to the core of the whole business. It isn't something that you can "put on" or force. It can only start with Christ in your soul. As we mentioned a few Sundays ago in another connection, it's a case of the individual being "under new management" by a Power greater than himself. Or, as one author has so dramatically expressed it in these familiar lines:

'Twas battered and scarred, and the auctioneer
Thought it scarcely worth his while
To waste his time on the old violin,
But held it up with a smile.
"What am I bid, good people", said he,
"Who'll start the bidding for me?
A dollar, a dollar, two dollars, who'll make it three?
Three dollars once, three dollars twice, going for three?"
But no! From the room far back, a gray haired man
Came forward and picked up the bow,
And, wiping the dust from the old violin
And tightening up the strings,
He played a melody pure and sweet,
As sweet as an angel sings.
The music ceased, and the auctioneer,
In a voice that was quiet and low,
Said, "What now am I bid for the old violin?"
And held it up with the bow.
"A thousand dollars, who'll make it two?
Two thousand! Who'll make it three?
Three thousand once, three thousand twice,
Going and gone!", said he.
The people cheered, but some of them cried,
"We don't understand what changed it's worth."
Swift came the reply,
"'Twas the touch of a master's hand."
So many a man with life out of tune,
And battered and torn with sin,
Is auctioned cheap to a thoughtless crowd.
A mess of pottage, a glass of wine,
A game, and he travels on.
He's going once, he's going twice,
He's going and he's almost gone.
But the Master comes, and the foolish crowd
Never can quite understand
The worth of a soul, and the change that's wrought
By the touch of the Master's hand.

Rev. David F. Murphy,
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