

Victory Through Defeat

A.W. Tozer:

And he said, Thy name
shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel:
for as a prince hast thou power with God
and with men, and hast prevailed.
(Genesis 32:28)

But God forbid that I should glory,
save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ,
by whom the world is crucified unto me,
and I unto the world.
(Galatians 6:14)

THE EXPERIENCES OF men who walked with God in olden times agree to teach that the Lord cannot fully bless a man until He has first conquered him. The degree of blessing enjoyed by any man will correspond exactly with the completeness of God's victory over him. This is a badly neglected tenet of the Christian's creed, not understood by many in this self-assured age, but it is nevertheless of living importance to us all. This spiritual principle is well illustrated in the book of Genesis.

Jacob was the wily old heel-catcher whose very strength was to him a near-fatal weakness. For two-thirds of his total life he had carried in his nature something hard and unconquered. Not his glorious vision in the wilderness nor his long bitter discipline in Haran had broken his harmful strength. He stood at the ford of Jabbok at the time of the going down of the sun, a shrewd, intelligent old master of applied psychology learned the hard way. The picture he presented was not a pretty one. He was a vessel marred in the making. His hope lay in his own defeat. This he did not know at the setting of the day, but had learned before the rising of the sun. All night he resisted God until in kindness God touched the hollow of his thigh and won the victory over him. It was only after he had gone down to humiliating defeat that he began to feel the joy of release from his own evil strength, the delight of God's conquest over him. Then he cried aloud for the blessing and refused to let go till it came. It had been a long fight, but for God (and for reasons known only to Him) Jacob had been worth the effort. Now he became another man, the stubborn and self-willed rebel was turned into a meek and dignified friend of God. He had prevailed indeed, but through weakness, not through strength.

Only the conquered can know true blessedness. This is sound philosophy, based upon life, and necessary by the constitution of things. We need not accept this truth blindly; the reasons are discoverable, among them being these: We are created beings, and as such are derived, not self-existent. Not to us has it been given to have life in ourselves. For life we are wholly and continually dependent upon God, the Source and Fountain of life. Only by full dependence upon Him are the hidden potentialities of our natures realized. Apart from this we are but half-men, malformed and unbeautiful members of a noble race once made to wear the image of its Creator.

Once in olden times the Lord declared that the end of all flesh had come before Him, and the years have brought no mitigation of that sentence. "They that are in the flesh cannot please God. The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. To be carnally minded is death" (Romans 8:8, 7, 6). By such words as these has God perpetuated the ancient sentence of condemnation. Whether we admit it or not the stroke of death is upon us, and it will be saving wisdom for us to learn to trust not in ourselves but in Him that raiseth the dead. For how dare we put confidence in anything so fugitive, so fleeting, as human life?

The wise man, I affirm, can find no rest
In that which perishes: nor will he lend
His heart to aught which doth on time depend.

From the sixteenth century these words have come to us, and in our moments of quiet wisdom we feel and know them to be true. Why then do we put our trust in things that perish and so become the dupes of time and the fools of change? Who has poisoned our cup and turned us into rebels? That old serpent, the devil, he it was who first beguiled us into that rash declaration of independence, a declaration which, in view of the circumstances, is both deeply comic and profoundly tragic. For our enemy must laugh at the incredible vanity that would lead us to match strength with the Almighty. That is the cynical comedy of it all; the tragedy drops with every tear and sorrows beside every grave.

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A little acquaintance with our own hearts will force us to acknowledge that there is no hope within us, and the briefest glance around should show us that we need expect no help from without. Nature itself will teach us that (apart from God) we are but orphans of the creation, waifs of the wide spaces, caught helpless amid the whirl of forces too great to comprehend. Onward through this world roars an immense and sightless power leaving in its wake generations, cities, civilizations. The earth, our brief home, offers us at last only a grave. For us there is nothing safe, nothing kind. In the Lord there is mercy, but in the world there is none, for nature and life move on as if unaware of good or evil, of human sorrow or human pain.

It was to save Jacob from deceptive hope that God confronted him that night on the bank of the river. To save him from self-trust it was necessary for God to conquer him, to wrest control away from him, to take His great power and rule with a rod of love. Charles Wesley, the sweet singer of England, with a spiritual penetration rare even among advanced Christians, wrote from the mouth of Jacob what he conceived to be his prayer as he wrestled with God at the ford of Jabbok:

My strength is gone, my nature dies;
 I sink beneath Thy weighty hand;
 Faint to revive, and fall to rise:
 I fall, and yet by faith I stand.
 I stand, and will not let Thee go,
 Till I Thy Name, Thy Nature know.

Lame as I am, I take the prey;
 Hell, earth, and sin, with ease o'Â'ercome;
 I leap for joy, pursue my way,
 And as a bounding hart fly home,
 Through all eternity to prove,
 Thy Nature and Thy Name is love.

We might well pray for God to invade and conquer us, for until He does, we remain in peril from a thousand foes. We bear within us the seeds of our own disintegration. Our moral imprudence puts us always in danger of accidental or reckless self-destruction. The strength of our flesh is an ever present danger to our souls. Deliverance can come to us only by the defeat of our old life. Safety and peace come only after we have been forced to our knees. God rescues us by breaking us, by shattering our strength and wiping out our resistance. Then He invades our natures with that ancient and eternal life which is from the beginning. So He conquers us and by that benign conquest saves us for Himself.

With this open secret awaiting easy discovery, why do we in almost all our busy activities work in another direction from this? Why do we build our churches upon human flesh? Why do we set such store by that which the Lord has long ago repudiated and despise those things which God holds in such high esteem? For we teach men not to die with Christ but to live in the strength of their dying manhood. We boast not in our weakness but in our strength. Values which Christ has declared to be false are brought back into evangelical favor and promoted as the very life and substance of the Christian way. How eagerly do we seek the approval of this or that man of worldly reputation. How shamefully do we exploit the converted celebrity. Anyone will do to take away the reproach of obscurity from our publicity-hungry leaders: famous athletes, congressmen, world travelers, rich industrialists; before such we bow with obsequious smiles and honor them in our public meetings and in the religious press. Thus we glorify men to enhance the standing of the Church of God, and the glory of the Prince of Life is made to hang upon the transient fame of a man who shall die.

It is amazing that we can claim to be followers of Christ and yet take so lightly the words of His servants. We could not act as we do if we took seriously the admonition of James the servant of God:

My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons. For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; and ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts? Hearken, my beloved brethren, hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him? (James 2:1-5)

Paul saw these things in another light than did those of whom James makes his complaint. Â“By the

cross,“ he said, “I am crucified unto the world” (see Galatian 6:14). The cross where Jesus died became also the cross where His apostle died. The loss, the rejection, the shame, belong both to Christ and to all who in very truth are His. The cross that saves them also slays them, and anything short of this is a pseudo-faith and not true faith at all. But what are we to say when the great majority of our evangelical leaders walk not as crucified men but as those who accept the world at its own value—rejecting only its grosser elements? How can we face Him who was crucified and slain when we see His followers accepted and praised? Yet they preach the cross and protest loudly that they are true believers. Are there then two crosses? And did Paul mean one thing and they another? I fear that it is so, that there are two crosses, the old cross and the new.

Remembering my own deep imperfections I would think and speak with charity of all who take upon them the worthy Name by which we Christians are called. But if I see aright, the cross of popular evangelicalism is not the cross of the New Testament. It is, rather, a new bright ornament upon the bosom of self-assured and carnal Christianity whose hands are indeed the hands of Abel, but whose voice is the voice of Cain. The old cross slew men; the new cross entertains them. The old cross condemned; the new cross amuses. The old cross destroyed confidence in the flesh; the new cross encourages it. The old cross brought tears and blood; the new cross brings laughter. The flesh, smiling and confident, preaches and sings about the cross; before the cross it bows and toward the cross it points with carefully staged histrionics—but upon that cross it will not die, and the reproach of that cross it stubbornly refuses to bear.

I well know how many smooth arguments can be marshaled in support of the new cross. Does not the new cross win converts and make many followers and so carry the advantage of numerical success? Should we not adjust ourselves to the changing times? Have we not heard the new slogan “New days, new ways”? And who but someone very old and very conservative would insist upon death as the appointed way to life? And who today is interested in a gloomy mysticism that would sentence its flesh to a cross and recommend self-effacing humility as a virtue actually to be practiced by modern Christians? These are the arguments, along with many more flippant still, which are brought forward to give an appearance of wisdom to the hollow and meaningless cross of popular Christianity.

Doubtless there are many whose eyes are open to the tragedy of our times, but why are they so silent when their testimony is so sorely needed? In the name of Christ men have made void the cross of Christ. “The noise of them that sing do I hear” (Exodus 32:18). Men have fashioned a golden cross with a graving tool, and before it they sit down to eat and drink and rise up to play. In their blindness they have substituted the work of their own hands for the working of God’s power. Perhaps our greatest present need may be the coming of a prophet to dash the stones at the foot of the mountain and call the Church out to repentance or to judgment.

Before all who wish to follow Christ the way lies clear. It is the way of death unto life. Always life stands just beyond death and beckons the man who is sick of himself to come and know the life more abundant. But to reach the new life he must pass through the valley of the shadow of death, and I know that at the sound of those words many will turn back and follow Christ no more. But “to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life” (John 6:68).

It may be that there are some well disposed followers who draw back because they cannot accept the morbidity which the idea of the cross seems to connote. They are lovers of the sun and find it too hard to think of living always in the shadows. They do not wish to dwell with death nor to live forever in an atmosphere of dying. And their instinct is sound. The Church has made altogether too much of deathbed scenes and churchyards and funerals. The musty smell of churches, the slow and solemn step of the minister, the subdued quiet of the worshipers and the fact that many enter a church only to pay their last respects to the dead all add up to the notion that religion is something to be dreaded and, like a major operation, suffered only because we are caught in a crisis. All this is not the religion of the cross; it is rather a gross parody on it. Churchyard Christianity, though not ever remotely related to the doctrine of the cross, may yet be partly to blame for the appearance of the new and jolly cross of today. Men crave life, but when they are told that life comes by the cross they cannot understand how it can be, for they have learned to associate with the cross such typical images as memorial plaques, dim-lit aisles and ivy. So they reject the true message of the cross and with that message they reject the only hope of life known to the sons of man.

The truth is that God has never planned that His children should live forever stretched upon a cross. Christ Himself endured His cross for only six hours. When the cross had done its work life entered and took over. “Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name” (Philippians 2:9).

His joyful resurrection followed hard upon His joyless crucifixion. But the first had to come before the

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second. The life that halts short of the cross is but a fugitive and condemned thing, doomed at last to be lost beyond recovery. That life which goes to the cross and loses itself there to rise again with Christ is a divine and deathless treasure. Over it death hath no more dominion. Whoever refuses to bring his old life to the cross is but trying to cheat death, and no matter how hard we may struggle against it, he is nevertheless fated to lose his life at last. The man who takes his cross and follows Christ will soon find that his direction is away from the sepulcher. Death is behind him and a joyous and increasing life before. His days will be marked henceforth not by ecclesiastical gloom, the churchyard, the hollow tone, the black robe (which are all but the ceremonies of a dead church), but by "joy unspeakable and full of glory" (1 Peter 1:8).

Real faith must always mean more than passive acceptance. It dare mean nothing less than surrender of our doomed Adam-life to a merciful end upon the cross. That is, we won God's just sentence against our evil flesh and admit His right to end its unlovely career. We reckon ourselves to have been crucified with Christ and to have risen again to newness of life. Where such faith is, God will always work in line with our reckoning. Then begins the divine conquest of our lives. This God accomplishes by an effective seizing upon, a sharp but love-impelled invasion of our natures. When He has over-powered our resistance He binds us with the cords of love and draws us to Himself. There, "faint with His loveliness" we lie conquered and thank God again and again for the blessed conquest. There, with moral sanity restored, we lift up our eyes and bless the Most High God. Then we go forth in faith to apprehend that for which we were first apprehended of God.

I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes: even so, Father; for so it seemed good in thy sight. (Luke 10:21)