2515.5A - GRIEF

One of the century's greatest sermons, preached following a personal tragedy: the loss of his wife

When life tumbles in, what then?

by ARTHUR JOHN GOSSIP

These things must come.

Yes, unbelievably they come. For years and years you and I go our sunny ways and live our happy lives, and the rumors of these terrors are blown to us very faintly as from a world so distant that it seems to have nothing to do with us; and then, to us too, it happens, sudden as a shell screaming out of the night, some one of the great crashing dispensations bursts in your life, and leaves an emptiness where there had been a home, a tumbled ruin of your ordered ways, a heart so sore you wonder how it holds together. And when it does happen, nobody has the right to snivel or whimper as if something unique and inexplicable had befallen him. "Never morning wore to evening but some heart did break" — hearts just as sensitive as yours and mine. But when yours breaks, what then? It is a bit late in the day to be talking about insurance when one's house is ablaze from end to end.

Goethe, of course, tells us that all the religions were designed to meet us and to give us help, just there; to enable us to bear the unbearable, to face the impossible, to see through with some kind of decency and honor what obviously can't be done at all.

But then so many people's religion is a fair-weather affair. A little rain, and it runs and crumbles; a touch of strain, and it snaps. How often out at the front one lay and watched an aeroplane high up in the blue and sunlight, a shimmering, glistening, beautiful thing: and then there came one shot out of a cloud, and it crashed down to earth, a broken mass of twisted metal. And many a one's religion is like that.

Carlyle, you recall, used to say that the chirpy optimism of Emerson maddened him, Emerson across whose sheltered life no cloud or shadow was allowed to blow. He seemed to me, panted Carlyle, like a man, standing himself well back out of the least touch of the spray, who throws chatty observations on the beauty of the weather to a poor soul battling for his life in huge billows that are buffeting the breath and the life out of him, wrestling with mighty currents that keep sweeping him away.

I, too, have had a happy life; and always when I have spoken of the Gospel, and the love of God, and Christ's brave reading of this puzzling life of ours, it has seemed to me that a very easy answer lay ready to anybody's hand who found these hard to credit. Yes, yes, they might well say irritably, if I stood in the sunshine where you are, no doubt I, too, could talk like that! But if your path ran over the cold moors, where the winds cut and whistle and pierce to the very bone, if you were set down where I am, I wonder if you would be so absolutely sure?

I'll tell you now. I know that we are warned in Job that the most drastic test of faith is not even these tremendous sorrows, but a long purgatory of physical and mental agony. Still, I don't think that any one will challenge my right to speak today. And what I have to say is this: when Claverhouse suddenly shot Brown of Priesthill, he, the callous brute, turned to the wife, and asked, "What think you now of your braw guidman?" And she, gathering together the scattered brain, made answer, "I aye thought muckle of him, but I think more of him now."

I aye thought muckle of the Christian faith; but I think more of it now, far more. I have never claimed to understand many things in this perplexing life of ours, and have always held that my dear master Browning went by much too far when he said confidently that for a Christian man there are no problems in the world or out of it. Surely the acknowledgment of God's love raises new problems. If love, then why and why and why and why? To me the essence of the faith has always seemed a certain intrepidity of loyalty that can believe undauntedly in the dark, and that still trusts God unshaken even when the evidence looks fairly damning.

Do you think Christ always found it easy? There was a day when he took God's will for him into his hand, and turned it round, and looked at it. And, "Is this what You ask of me?" he said; and for a moment his eyes looked almost incredulous. Aye, and another day when, puzzled and uncertain, he cried out, "But is this really what You mean that I should give You, this here, this now?" Yes, and another still when the cold rushing waters roared in a raging torrent through his soul: yet he would not turn back; he fought his way to the farther bank, and died still believing in the God

Illustration by Cynthia Miller

who seemed to have deserted him. And that is why he is given a name that is above every name.

I do not understand this life of ours. But still less can I comprehend how people in trouble and loss and bereavement can fling away peevishly from the Christian faith. In God's name, fling to what? Have we not lost enough without losing that too? If Christ is right — if, as he says, there are somehow, hidden away from our eyes as yet, still there, wisdom and planning and kindness and love in these dark dispensations — then we can see them through.

But if Christ was wrong, and all that is not so; if God set his foot on my home crudely, heedlessly, blunderingly, blindly, as I unaware might tread upon some insect in my path, have I not the right to be angry and sore? If Christ was right, and immortality and the dear hopes of which he speaks do really lie a little way ahead, we can manage to make our way to them. But if it is not so, if it is all over, if there is nothing more, how dark the darkness grows! You people in the sunshine may believe the faith, but we in the shadow must believe it. We have nothing else.

Further, there is a saying in Scripture, "Receive not the Grace of God in vain." That Christ should die on our behalf, that God should lavish his kindness on us, and that nothing should come of it, how terrible! And were it not pitiful if we receive the discipline of life in vain: have all the suffering of it, pay down the price in full, yet miss what it was sent to teach!

I know that at first great sorrow is just stunned, that the sore heart is too numbed to feel anything, even God's hand. When his wife died, Rossetti tells us, he passed through all that tremendous time with a mind absolutely blank, learned nothing, saw nothing, felt nothing; so that, looking back, all he could say was that sitting in a wood with his head in his hands, somehow it was photographed permanently on his passive mind that a certain wild flower has three petals. That was all.

But by and by the gale dies down, and the moon rises, and throws a lane of gold to us across the blackness and the heaving of the tumbling waters. After all it is not in the day, but in the night, that star rises after star, and constellation follows constellation, and the immensity of this bewildering universe looms up before our staggered minds. And it is in the dark that the faith becomes biggest and bravest, that its wonder grows yet more and more. "Grace," said Samuel Rutherford, "grows best in the winter." And already some things have become very clear.

One becomes certain about immortality. You think that you believe in that. But wait till you have lowered your dearest into an open grave, and you will know what believing it means. I have always gazed up at Paul in staggered admiration when he burst out at the grave's mouth into his scornful challenge, his exultant ridicule of it, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" But now it does not seem to me such a tremendous feat: for I have felt that very same.

True, I can tell him where death's sting lies. Ah! It is the constant missing of what used to be always here; the bitter grudging every second of the dear body to the senseless earth, the terrible insecurity, for one is never safe — anything, nothing, and the old overwhelming pain comes rushing back. Yet when the other day I took up a magazine, it was with amazement I discovered they are still chattering about whether we people are immortal or not. I am past that. I know.

I don't think you need be afraid of life. Our hearts are very frail; and there are places where the road is very steep and very lonely. But we have a wonderful God. And as Paul puts it, what can separate us from his love? Not death, he says immediately, pushing that aside at once as the most obvious of all impossibilities.

No, not death. For, standing in the roaring of the Jordan, cold to the heart with its dreadful chill, and very conscious of the terror of its rushing, I too, as Hopeful [in *Pilgrim's Progress*], can call back to you who one day in your turn will have to cross it, "Be of good cheer, my brother, for I feel the bottom, and it is sound."

■ *The Reverend Arthur John Gossip, D.D., LL.D. (1873-1954), was a prince of the Scottish pulpit. Born in Glasgow, he was educated at Edinburgh University and served churches in Liverpool, Glasgow and Aberdeen. He was chaplain to British troops in France during World War I. This message, considered by Dr. Andrew W. Blackwood the most influential to be preached in the English language during the first half of the 20th century, was delivered by Dr. Gossip in Aberdeen on the Sunday morning following the sudden death of his wife. It is abridged from 'The Hero in Thy Soul,' by permission of T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, Scotland, and Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1950.*