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Deuteronomy 32:45-33:4
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DEALING WITH DISAPPOINTMENT

Six centuries ago a wise and witty monk by the name of Thomas a Kempis revealed his deep insight concerning human nature when he observed in one of the greatest devotional classics ever written, that it was quite easy to be courageous and content as long as no disappointment came one's way. Every mature mind will verify that observation.

As long as men are men, however, disappointment will be a part of life. Analyzing the word, disappointment means to fail to get something one expects, and we all fail to get much that we expect and hope for.

One of the greatest disappointments of the virtuous man is the disappointment he often has in himself. We have high and noble goals. We dream great dreams of our accomplishments. We often visualize our successes and achievements like so many Walter Mittys, only one day to be rudely awakened by the reality of our failures. The appointment with destiny that we had hoped and expected did not materialize and we were indeed dis--appointed.

We are often disappointed with our loved ones, our friends, our acquaintances and neighbors who do not measure up to our expectations for them. No matter that those expectations may have been far too high in the first place.

We may often be disappointed with our leaders whether they be religious, social or political leaders. We are not disappointed or even surprised if they turn out to be or to do better than we expected, but we are apt to be saddened, disillusioned and disappointed if they are or do worse than we expected.

If hope springs eternal in the human breast, then disappointment must likewise be eternal. As long as there is hope there is the possibility of that hope failing to be realized. If we don't want to be disappointed then we had better not hope at all, as was well pointed out by one of the cynical poets:

"Hope tells a flattering tale,
Delusive, vain and hollow
Ah! Let not hope prevail,
Lest disappointment follow." 1

But just as the wise know that "it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all", so they also know that it is good to have hope even though disappointment may and occasionally must

1 "The Universal Songster", Miss Wrother

follow. Indeed, the wise know that man cannot long endure without hope. When we have lost hope we have lost everything. As Samuel Johnson put it:

"It is necessary to hope, though hope should always be deluded; for hope itself is happiness, and its frustrations however frequent are yet less dreadful than its extinction." ²

II

Before we begin to deal with the method by which we may best deal with our disappointments let us try to make a clear distinction between hope and faith. Many of us are tempted to use the words interchangeably. Paul, in writing to the Corinthian Christians perceived that there was a difference, when he urged that the greatest and most enduring virtues were "faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love."

Faith, as Paul pointed out, was predicated upon some reasonable evidence. Faith, he insisted, was the "substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Faith is based on evidence, however meager it may be; hope is wishful thinking, the mere desire that something should be so, the feeling that what one wants will indeed happen. I may hope that it will snow tomorrow (if I happen to be a skier) merely because I would like it to snow, but I have faith that it will not rain because the temperature is predicted to be well below the freezing point.

Both our faith and our hope may result in disappointment. We may, based on favorable statistics, have faith that our favorite team will win the match. Or, apart from any evidence, statistical or otherwise, we may merely hope it will win because we desire it to win. In either case, disappointment is a distinct possibility.

To put it in religious terms, if a man merely hopes there is a kind and beneficent Providence in the universe he will not likely put much confidence in that Providence, nor will it prove to be a strong source of comfort to him in time of difficulty. If, however, he has (based on some evidence) faith that there is such a God, his trust and confidence will be in direct proportion to his faith, as will be the comfort and strength which he derives from it.

III

In any case, disappointment being a universal human experience, how do we deal with it? First, as we have already suggested, we ought to develop and strengthen our faith. We ought to search and struggle until we find evidence which can transform mere hope into strong faith. If we have no faith upon which we can rest our lives, our disappointments will finally turn into disillusionment and finally into despair.

One of the most devastating instances of shattered hope related in the Bible must surely be that of Moses leading his tragic band of Israelites through the wilderness for 40 long years hoping against hope for a safe arrival in the land "flowing with milk and honey". At the very moment when fulfillment seemed assured, at the very brink of success, Moses heard the terrible judgment of his God concerning himself, "Thou shalt not go thither into the land which I give the children of Israel." 3

During those 40 years in the wilderness of Sinai Moses had got well acquainted with God and so his disappointment did not destroy him. His shattered hopes did not disillusion him. His broken dreams did not cause him to despair. He gathered his people about him and praised the God who had estopped him from the fulfillment of his greatest hope and dream.

Could you do that? Does disappointment crush you and make you bitter and unhappy? When you can't have your own way do you pick up your marbles and go home? Or do you, like Moses, turn and render your thanks to Almighty God for His goodness and mercy that will never disappoint or betray?

Could you do what Ignatius Loyola said he would do if the Pope destroyed the Jesuit order to which he had given the greatest part of his life--be able to say and to mean, "One hour in prayer and it will all be the same"?

I must tell you that I have struggled with that myself. To those who do not already know it, I will confess that I have never been the most patient of men. I have worked and waited six long years for this congregation to begin a project that I strongly believe in--a home for the aging; for those who need it, and which will help and succor them in a supportive and spiritual environment. Perhaps all of us in this congregation are not of one mind in this matter. If that be the case then no matter what happens some of us may be disappointed. Will one hour of prayer make it all the same? I trust that the answer is in the affirmative, and if it is, then it is because we will have tried to commit ourselves and the project into the all-wise providential hands of God. Whatever happens, we will know that He will not disappoint us nor desert us.

"Yet, in the maddening maze of things,
And tossed by storm and flood,
To one fixed trust my spirit clings;
I know that God is good." 4

IV

Let me move from the sublime poetry of Whittier to the somewhat ridiculous story of the two small boys aged 7 and 2 who were waiting in line at an ice-cream stand. The little brother was announcing loudly, "I want vanilla! I want vanilla!" Unfortunately the supply of vanilla had given out. Interested adults stood by to see how the 7 year old boy would handle such a crisis. Without flinching he ordered two strawberry cones, and handing one to his little brother he said, "Here you are, pink vanilla!"

So much depends, does it not, on how we learn to handle life's inevitable disappointments, and one of the things that can surely help us is a sense of humor. A little stoicism can also help. Patience is one of the greatest of healing virtues. But I reiterate, nothing can help like God can help.

How disappointed Jesus must have been in Judas and in Peter when one betrayed him and the other denied him. Yet he knew that their lives as well as his own were in God's hands and God must always win.

How should one deal with his disappointments? Perhaps the best and final answer is this: Give them to God. Recognize that they are a part of life, that you cannot avoid them, that they will come regardless of your hopes, your dreams and your faith. They may sadden you, they may sometimes discourage you. But with God's help they can never defeat you.