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Psalm 107:1-22 (NE)
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TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES

John Henry Newman, a Protestant clergyman who became a Roman Catholic Cardinal, wrote a hymn which became a favorite with millions of Christians. It is in our Pilgrim Hymnal and we still sing it occasionally. It is "Lead Kindly Light", and part of the first verse reads as follows:

*"Keep thou my feet; I do not ask to see
The distant scene: one step enough for me."*

I submit that it is a philosophy easier to sing about than to live by. Most of us, most of the time, would agree that living by faith is both admirable and necessary. However, we would much prefer to have knowledge rather than rely on faith with all of its accompanying uncertainty. We would like to see the distant scene. We would like to know what tomorrow will bring. We are not keep about putting it all in the hands of God and forgetting about it. And of course, God did not intend that we do that completely. That is why he gave us a brain and the ability to reason. Follow your reason as far as it will take you, and when it will take you no further, then put your faith and confidence in the God of the future to hold securely all that you commit to Him.

What I want to share with you this morning is the good news that there is a way in which you can know something about the future. You don't need to be a psychic and you don't need to possess a crystal ball. All you need is some knowledge of the past and some ability to understand it and apply it to the future. It is what some would call common sense, but of course that commodity is relatively uncommon. It is, I am sure, the ability possessed by the prophets of the Old Testament when they prophesied and predicted good or evil events for the people of Israel.

This ability to see the distant scene or predict certain aspects of the future is based on the reality that there is a certain body of ultimate truth in the universe which man cannot alter. Because there is that body of ultimate truth consequences always flow from actions. We may not be able to predict with certainty the time and the precise nature of those consequences but we can be absolutely certain that some consequences, for good or for ill, will occur. We do not live in a capricious world where things happen accidentally. A nuclear physicist of renown has written a book entitled Chance And Accident, in which he concludes that there really is no such thing as chance or accident, there is only cause and effect, truth and consequences.

II

Noel Coward, the playwright, once sent a postcard to a young girl he knew on which was a picture of the famous armless statue of Venus De Milo. On the back of the card he wrote: "This is what will happen to you if you don't stop biting your finger nails!"

Such precise consequences do not always follow from our actions. But from every wrong action does flow evil consequences of some kind, and from every right action there flows good consequences of another kind.

Thus it is revealed that you and I live in an orderly universe, what some have called "a world of lawful freedom". We are free to do pretty much what we please within the limits of the laws which govern the universe. But when we ignore those laws or disobey those laws, whether consciously or unconsciously, we must suffer the consequences which God has ordained, consequences which flow naturally from the natural or the moral law. A law without consequences is no law at all.

The simplest illustration I know is the law of gravity. It governs a great deal of what goes on in our world. We cannot defy it with impunity. If we try then we suffer consequences. If you ever jumped off the garage in an attempt to fly, as I did once as a young boy, you learned very quickly how the law operates and what the consequences of defying it were. You then can quite easily become a prophet of what will occur in the future when others defy that law. It doesn't take any great insight or understanding--just experience and common sense.

III

Now why is all of this important for us to grasp? It seems to me that it is exceedingly important in giving us an insight into the problem of suffering.

Again, take a simple illustration. A young boy loves candy. He discovers in the family-room a box of beautiful, rich chocolates and proceeds to satisfy a rather large appetite for sweets. An hour or so later, he has a terribly upset stomach. Those of us who have been through that experience, and again, I am one of that number, might argue that the boy got what he asked for, and if he had done it many times before, he got what he deserved. Would you say that God was punishing him for his sin, or rather that in the natural order of God's universe, some consequences followed in a very natural way from a certain human action? We can prevent those consequences by avoiding the action. We can alleviate them with therapy of some kind. But we cannot abolish them.

Now, change the facts a little. A person smokes a pack of cigarettes every day for thirty years. He has been told over and over again that such an action may result in lung cancer. But the victim ignores those warnings and a disaster occurs. He gets lung cancer. Shall he now ask, "Why is God doing this to me? What have I done to deserve this punishment?" It is not God's punishment. It is an action's natural consequence taking place in a very orderly fashion in this world of lawful freedom.

Would we rather live in a universe where God limited our freedom and kept us from doing foolish things? Would we prefer a life wherein God always treated us like infants and let us do only those things which were good for us? I might add, that's the kind of society some liberal congressmen and other do-gooders are trying to create in this country. May their efforts forever be crowned with failure. That kind of pseudo-perfect world would be a boring, stagnant place in which I, for one, would not care to live--the Brave New World of Aldous Huxley, the utopian society which is impossible for free men and women to achieve.

What God in effect says to us is that there are some rules in this game of life and the sooner we learn them, the better off we will be. Until we learn them and abide by them--until we learn how to live with them--we are going to suffer. But God does not inflict the suffering. We inflict it upon ourselves by our willful wrongdoing or by our ignorance.

To some this distinction I am endeavoring to establish may seem extremely subtle and somewhat philosophic. But I assure you that it is extremely important. Failure to understand it is often what leads people to accuse God of terrible atrocities by concluding, "This was the will of God," or what causes many men and women to lose their faith in a God whom they charge with punishing the innocent little child who dies of a rare disease, when the cause is really human sin or ignorance, and sometimes inexcusable ignorance.

God is love; he does not punish. God is justice; he does let us suffer the natural consequences of our actions. God is wise; he has put us into a world of lawful freedom where we may search for truth--and find it!

IV

Yes, there is truth and there are consequences which flow from truth. But not all truth lies in the physical universe. There is a truth which rules the spiritual world as well. Even our thoughts have consequences. Solomon wisely indicated as much when he wrote in a Proverb,

"As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he."

Good thoughts promote good actions and evil thoughts promote evil actions. That is why it is so important for all of us, but especially for the young, to fill our minds with that which is good, true and beautiful, and eschew that which is low and vulgar.

Hear these words of Herman Miller:

"Think not the beautiful doings of thy soul shall perish unremembered. They abide with thee forever; and alone the good thou doest nobly, truth and love approve. Each pure and gentle deed of mercy brings an honest recompense, and from it looms that sovereign knowledge of thy duty done--a joy beyond all dignities of earth."

But the opposite is also true; each low and mean action corrupts our soul and tarnishes our spirit. They too are remembered and have their consequences.

In Psalm 107 David points out that those who cry to the Lord in their trouble are saved. That is true. But God did not save them from their trouble, from the consequences of their actions. He saved them in their trouble and enabled them to turn the evil consequences into victories, or at least gave them courage to endure.

Finally one should point out that if men and women cried unto the Lord before they were in trouble, there would be many fewer occasions when they would need to cry unto him in their trouble.

But we can be sure of this; he is always there. He does not leave us to bear the consequences alone. Turn to him and share with him your joy and your sorrow.