

"LIFE'S DETOURS"

August 7, 1988

TEXT: James 1:2 "Count it all joy, my Brethren, when you meet various trials . . . "

We might just as well admit it. This Bible of ours contains some very comforting passages, but it says some pretty wild and strange things, too. I mean, most of us find comfort and encouragement from passages like "God is love" and "The Lord Is My Shepherd." But what about some of those others? What about things like "Love your enemies" and "Turn the other cheek"? Those are in the Bible, too. And, if we are really honest with ourselves, would not we admit that the main reason they do not bother us is because we rarely think about them. And, even when we do, we do not take them seriously. We treat them as little more than nice sounding platitudes. Words that might have been all right for someone like Jesus but which do not apply to ordinary mortals like ourselves. And, yet, is it not often these hard sayings that we have the greatest need to hear? Are they not the ones from which we can profit most?

Take this morning's scripture, for instance. I think the Jerusalem Bible has a particularly good translation: "My brothers, you will always have your trials, but, when they come, try to treat them as a happy privilege." And perhaps better still is the J. B. Phillips version: "When all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives, do not resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends." Imagine that! When problems and disappointments come into your life, do not complain. Do not even suffer in stoic silence. Be glad you have problems! Rejoice in your disappointments! Treat them as friends rather than enemies!

Now, I confess that I, for one, find that very hard to do. It is almost impossible for me to think that way, even in the abstract, when things are going well. And it is harder still when real problems and disappointments come and I find myself forced to deal with them. At times like that I want to write James off as some kind of nut who just did not know what he was talking about. Or, at very least, I find myself saying, "That may have been all right for James. After all, he was Jesus' brother. Maybe he was just saint enough to pull it off. But do not try to pin those words on me. I am just an ordinary human being. And I am not that strong." Perhaps some of you may just feel the same way.

But, what if we are wrong? What if James really knew what he was talking about? Would we not be wise at least to consider

that possibility? If troubles and disappointments really can be friends in disguise, would we not be better off --and happier, too-- if we realized that? So this morning I would like us to consider three ways in which James may be right.

In the first place, disappointments and problems can make us strong. Stronger than we ever thought we could be. Perhaps some of you watched the Packers' pre-season game on television last night. If so, you saw more than just a game. You saw some of the finest athletes in the world competing for jobs in the National Football League. In some small way I can appreciate what they are doing because in my day I was considered a pretty good football player, too. Good enough to be offered a football scholarship to the University of Alabama which, then as now, had one of the top college teams in the country. But even the best players then could not begin to match the ones you see today.

Today's players are bigger, and stronger, and faster, and better conditioned than we ever were. But that did not just happen. They got that way through the creative use of stress. Through exercise and weight-lifting, pushing their bodies almost beyond endurance. And, not just during the football season either, but all year around. It is not easy, and it is not fun. But nothing less can build the kind of body strength that athletes need.

And it will not build strength of character either. Of course, most of us would rather have a life that is free from problems and disappointments. But that does not mean it is best for us. Now, I am not suggesting that we go out and look for trouble. But when it comes, let us remember that it brings opportunities with them. Opportunities to grow in ways which only stress makes possible. So St. Peter writes: "In this you rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which, though perishable, is tested by fire, may redound to praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." (I Peter 1:6-7)

In the second place, trials and disappointments often give us a chance to stop and take a good look at our lives. Jesus said, "Enter in by the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. But the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few." Unfortunately we rarely realize we are on that easy road till something happens to make us stop and look at ourselves. Until then we are often too busy and too self-satisfied to wonder where we are really headed.

Take, for example, a man named Jess Lair. Some people might have thought Jess had it made. At only 35 he had his own successful advertising agency. He lived in a big five bedroom house in the wealthiest suburb of Minneapolis. He had money, prestige, and success. But he was killing himself. And it was only as he recovered from a major heart attack that he found the

time, and the teachability, to realize he was very unhappy. So he decided to change his whole life. He made himself a promise that he would never again do anything that he was not really committed to. He gave up his advertising business, went back to school, and eventually earned a Ph.D. in psychology. Now he devotes his time to teaching, to writing, and to sharing with others the things his heart attack taught him. Through his classes, his workshops, and books like I Ain't Much Baby --But I'm All I've Got and its sequel, I Ain't Well --But I Sure Am Better, Jess Lair has helped literally millions of people. And, for the first time in his life, he is truly happy. So you tell me. Was his heart attack an intruder? Or was it a friend?

And, finally, problems and disappointments can put us in touch with resources we might otherwise have overlooked. How often I call on people in the hospital and somewhere during the course of our conversation they show me a big stack of get-well cards and tell me, with tears in their eyes, "I never knew I had so many friends."

In a similar vein, a minister in Florida, tells of a woman whose husband died under especially trying circumstances. At the time, of course, she could think only of her sorrow. Perhaps she even blamed God for allowing such things to happen. But, a few years later, she said, "You know, I have come to thank God for my grief." Why? Because, in her sorrow, she discovered God as she had never known Him before. How often that happens. When some tragedy strikes, God somehow manages to find a crack in the walls we all build up around ourselves. And, for the first time, we come to know Him in a real and personal way.

So what am I saying? That as soon as this service is over we should all run out and look for some trouble to get into? Of course not! But, then, we really do not have to. On the highway of life, sooner or later we all run into detour signs. And, when we do, it is only natural for us to become angry and unhappy; to indulge ourselves in self-pity; and to wonder how God could permit such things.

And there is nothing wrong with that --unless we stop there. Unless we allow ourselves to wallow in negative feelings till they destroy us. But we do not have to do that. Instead, we can admit our feelings; accept them for what they are, and then start looking for the good that we and God together can bring out of it.

Please understand, I do not believe that God specifically sends these troubles to us. But when they come, and sooner or later they probably will, then God can use them --and us-- for good. Certainly St. Paul was no stranger to troubles, but, in his faith, he wrote: "We know that in everything God is working for good with those who love him." (Romans 8:28) "When all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives, do not resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends."

PASTORAL PRAYER:

Almighty and most loving God, in Whom we live and move and have our being; grant unto us this day --and every day-- the strength, the guidance, the comfort of Your presence. Come with each new dawn to encourage us, in mind, body, and spirit for the living of that day. Make Yourself known to us in the beauties of nature, in the call to service, in the love of friends and family. Come, too, in the trials and problems that stretch us to our limits, which force us to seek new strength within and around us. Be present in the sympathy and compassion of those who care, in hands reached out to help, in tears that mingle with our own. Whether our days be easy or hard, let Your light surround us every moment, directing our thoughts, guiding our actions, lifting our spirits.

And come in the evening twilight to shed Your mantle of peace upon the world that all who love You may rest themselves in You to the renewal and refreshment of our souls. Bless and purify the works to which we have set our hands, forgive the errors we have made, and keep us always in Your care that in loving and being loved, in serving and being served, in our needs and in those of others, Your will may be done and Your name glorified, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. AMEN.