

THE REASON FOR OUR HOPE

by

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE WHY OF WAR

SOME YEARS AGO, during World War II, while glancing through a popular magazine, I came upon a page of pictures which horrified me. I stared at them incredulously. Was it possible that I was living in the twentieth century with its boasted culture and vaunted progress, or was I in the unenlightened ages when savage force was the court of last appeal? Those little children with their mangled bodies, why had they in their childish innocence been so brutally bombed? That hospital, far removed from the trenches, why had it been so cruelly demolished and the broken bodies within its walls broken further? And as I stared I thought of the unutterable carnage of which those photographs were but samples; and as I thought of that, and thought too of the limitless pity, the unbounded love of the heavenly Father, there rose within my soul the exclamation, "Oh, God, why?" Not an outburst of unbelief, but an expression of bewilderment in the face of the naked realities of life.

Now it is somewhat reassuring to learn that such an agonized inquiry has risen in the troubled hearts of devout men in centuries past; for there is really nothing new under the sun, and the calamities which overwhelm us are by no means a novelty in human history.

Thus, for instance, we can turn to the ancient prophet Habakkuk and observe that he too was perplexed by devastating injustice and unrighteousness. His lot was cast, as ours is, in an era of confusion and chaos. He lived, in all probability during the tumultuous days of wicked King Manasseh when the irresistible, terrifying armies of Chaldea were laying waste the nations of Asia. And Habakkuk could not understand why, despite his most fervid prayers, the heavens were sealed and Jehovah did not answer. His patience finally wore thin, and he well-nigh rebuked the Lord:

"How long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear! even cry out unto thee of violence and thou wilt not save!" (Habakkuk 1:2).

Puzzled and distressed, he subjected God to cross-examination:

"Why dost thou show me iniquity, and cause me to behold grievance? for spoiling and violence are before me: and there are that raise up strife and contention. Therefore the law is slacked, and judgment doth never go forth: for the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore wrong judgment proceedeth" (Habakkuk 1:3-4).

“Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity: wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he?” (Habakkuk 1:13)

The Chaldean tyrant had outraged humanity; misery, disorder, and wrong filled the earth as the waters cover the sea, and God did nothing about it! Driven to his wit's end by brutal facts, Habakkuk demanded why.

This is still a fundamental problem of thought, a question which wells up continually now, and will not subside because of World War II with its unspeakable horrors, with its millions of soldiers and civilians who have been wounded, blinded, crippled, raped, exiled, maddened, butchered! O God, why? Why, O merciful Father?

How can divine love be harmonized with the misery of human experience? How can it possibly be? So grave is this difficulty which cannot honestly be ignored, that the English philosopher, John Stuart Mill declared that “the problem of reconciling infinite benevolence and justice in the Creator of such a world as this is insoluble.” I cannot agree with Mill, but I can appreciate his perplexity, for as Edwin Booth once wrote to a friend of his, “Life is a great big spelling book, and on every page we turn the words grow harder to understand the meaning of.” Life is indeed like that; and everybody who thinks about these things must confess that here is a problem whose meaning we can scarcely understand.

Once more I would refer you to the Word of the Lord as we have it in Habakkuk, the prophet who impatiently and insistently asks, “Why?” After raising the problem in its acutest form, the puzzled interrogator decides to **“watch to see what he will say to me, and what I shall answer when I am reproved”** (Habakkuk 2:1).

And as he hopefully lingers, the voice of the Lord answers:

“The vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie; though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry” (Habakkuk 2:3).

Now what is the essential meaning of this reply?

God counsels the heavy-hearted, baffled Habakkuk, “Wait and see. A day is assuredly coming, as assuredly as I, the Lord God, live, in which injustice will be righted, evil will be fully and finally punished, and the tangled riddles of life happily unraveled. Trust in Me, and be patient. Rest upon the assurance that the Judge of all the earth will do right.”

Here, then, is one case where we must take our faith down from the shelf and put it to work. Believing where we cannot clearly understand, trusting where we cannot see, we must affirm with Paul, **“All things work together for good to them that love God”** (Romans 8:28).

We must affirm, as did Alfred Lord Tennyson:

O yet we trust that somehow good
Will be the final goal of ill,
To pangs of nature, sins of will,
Defects of doubt and taints of blood—
That nothing walks with aimless feet,
That not one life will be destroyed,
Or cast as rubbish to the void,
When God hath made the pile complete.

— In Memoriam

We must affirm, as does one of our favorite hymns:

Not now, but in the coming years,
It may be in that Better Land,
We'll read the meaning of our tears,
And there sometime we'll understand.
We'll catch the broken threads again,
And finish what we here began.
Heaven will all mysteries explain,
And there, up there, we'll understand.

Let us frankly recognize the limits of our minds. Let us realize that we now see in a glass darkly and know but partially and imperfectly. And if our faith in God is more than a meaningless verbal assent to His existence, let us leave the full explanation to Him to disclose in His own appointed time. And meanwhile, let us wait and trust!

In His own time God will give a satisfying solution to this troublesome enigma. **“Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?”** To ask the question is to answer it.

But, in addition to this consideration, do not forget that the Bible everywhere teaches the solemn, little-liked truth that man himself, not God, is responsible for all human misery. Scripture emphatically announces that man is a sinner who has deliberately, of his own free will, revolted against the loving Creator. And the bitter fruit of sin is suffering and sorrow. Hence, as a willful transgressor, man lies under the judgment of God, a judgment, both remedial and retributive, which expresses itself at times in calamities like earthquakes, floods, and wars.

How replete the Old Testament is with instance after instance of this principle! Verily, one of its major teachings is that many a catastrophe is a divine visitation because of human depravity and disobedience. This is brought out plainly in the Book of Judges. With the Midianites ravaging the country of Israel, with the people of God undergoing terrible affliction, it seemed as if the Lord had abdicated His throne. And thus Gideon, the chieftain of the Jews, almost angrily asked, **“If the Lord be with us, why then is all this befallen us?”** (Judges 6:13). And the explanation given through the Lord's unnamed prophet was simply: **“Ye have not obeyed my voice”** (Judges 6:10). The calamity of the Midianite invasion came as a divine visitation because of Israel's depravity and disobedience.

And what is the colossal disaster of the present war but terrible judgment because of terrible sin?

- God has been forgotten.
- His law has been brazenly broken.
- Deplorable licentiousness has reigned unchecked.
- The love of Heaven has been mockingly spurned.
- The bloody cross of Calvary, the supreme revelation of divine mercy, has been passed by, laughed at, spat upon!

And the long-restrained judgment of outraged Deity is now being unleashed upon a Bible-hating, Christ-rejecting civilization.

The principle of calamity as a divine visitation because of human disobedience is brought out also in the prophecy of Jeremiah. The Jews lamented as Nebuchadnezzar, with his mighty engines of destruction and his ingenious methods of torture, ransacked their towns, slaughtered the inhabitants and carried the remnant into a captivity that was a living death. They protested indignantly, **“Lord, Thou art unjust. Why dost Thou permit these things?”** And through Jeremiah, the Lord spoke:

“Why criest thou for thine afflictions? thy sorrow is incurable for the multitude of thine iniquity: because thy sins are increased, I have done these things unto thee” (Jeremiah 30:15).

The same principle is brought out again in the prophecy of Daniel. In a notable confession, made when Israel was in exile, the prophet sadly states time and again, **“*These calamities have come upon us because we have knowingly sinned against God.*”** The nations of the world must make that same sorrowful confession, admitting with Daniel, **“The Lord is righteous in all his works which he doeth.”**

Yes, God is indeed righteous in everything He permits, even this horrible war. For humanity as a whole, after nearly twenty centuries have ebbed away, continues, increasingly so, to turn aside from the Lord and to trample under foot the precious blood of Jesus Christ.

Consequently, judgment is falling.

So as we raise our puzzled question, “Why?” let us not forget that man, as the author of his destiny, is alone responsible for the world’s misery because he continues to sin against God. And catastrophe will doubtless come upon the heels of catastrophe until the nations repent, forsake their evil ways, and cry aloud for mercy that is never denied.

And let us not forget, furthermore, another reassuring fact which is stated in the Psalms:

“Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee: the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain” (Psalm 76:10).

God does not create evil, but in His omnipotence He utilizes the very injustice and unrighteousness of man to work out His own program. However much we clamor for Him to arrange affairs to please us, to terminate our misfortunes, to make wars to cease, sometimes He will ignore us, because we pray in ignorance not realizing that God is making the very wrath of man to praise Him.

Do not imagine, therefore, that this war is some uncalculated misfortune which upsets Heaven as well as earth. This calamity will be utilized by God in the outworking of His eternal purposes. The very wrath of man will yet praise Him.

And now, how do these things touch your life and mine? Are the facts which have been presented abstract, remote, too theoretical to help us as we face the brutal realities of the present war? Are they meaningful for each of us personally? It seems to me they are.

If we are Christians, let us have humility enough to confess that the complete solution is beyond us. Let us have faith enough to trust in God, believing that He can and someday will explain this enigma. Let us have courage enough to declare unflinchingly that war is the tragic, ugly consequence, not merely of economic maladjustments and racial differences, but ultimately of tragic, ugly sin, notably the sin of man's willful rejection of God's love in the cross of Christ. Let us, then, summon men to repentance, and let us give ourselves to fervent prayer as never before.

If you are not a Christian, realize that war is a divine visitation because of human disobedience. And as you realize that judgment is righteously devastating the world because of your sin, your neighbor's sin, and the sin of millions exactly like you, fall on your knees in contrition and confession, and cry aloud to God for mercy in the prevailing name of Jesus Christ, praying that all your guilt may be pardoned because of the blood sacrificially poured out upon Calvary.

Oh, if you do that, and if multiplied others like you do it, the wrath of God will be restrained, and in the wake of spiritual revival, peace will come. And though war may continue to rage for some time, in your own heart will be the tranquility which is the portion of only those who were rebels but are now reconciled to God through Christ.

~ end of chapter 14 ~

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