



I have laboured in vain

***Then I said, "I have laboured in vain,
I have spent my strength for nought, and in vain;
yet surely my judgement is with the Lord, and my work with my God".***

Isaiah 49:4

The late Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones in his commentary on Ephesians stated: *"If I were asked to hazard an opinion as to what is the most prevailing disease in the church today, I would suggest that it is discouragement."*

A similar opinion was expressed by Prof. Donald Macleod in the columns *The Monthly Record* when he was then editor: *"One of the saddest features of the Church,"* he said, *"is the widespread prevalence of a spirit of discouragement."* This spirit, I would suggest, still pervades much of the Evangelical Church today and is well articulated in the words of our text. No doubt there are many causes for this. The general state of the world with its strifes, its famines and its diseases is one reason. The present state of the nation with its crime, its violence, its immorality and its unemployment is another. The ailing state of the Church with its apathy, its divisions and its deficits is yet another. And, of course, there is the media, whose department of propaganda relentlessly seeks to persuade us that the tide of Christian faith has ebbed and that the Christian gospel is outdated and irrelevant. These are indeed difficult and discouraging days both for the Church and the individual Christian.

However, as Dr John Stott has recently written: *"No Christian can be a cynic or a pessimist."* And certainly the Scriptures, though in their realism they frankly recognise our proneness to this disposition, do not condone it. Again and again, they challenge this attitude as in the words of the Psalmist: *"Why art thou cast down, O my soul?"* Likewise, whilst our text focuses our attention on this particular condition, the life of the context has much instruction to offer us, both as to how we ought to react to its cause and how to overcome its particular temptation.

A surprising confession of failure

Let us look then at this passage and note first it's Surprising Confession of Failure. I say "surprising" because of the person who is making the admission, for he is none other than the Servant of Jehovah. This is neither the time nor the place for entering upon a study of the Servant's identity in deference to the division of opinion among scholars on this issue. Suffice it to say in the words of Prof. Leupold, the well-known Old Testament scholar and commentator:

"The person under consideration is none less than the one who in the New Testament goes under the name of Jesus, the Christ... There are too many references of the New Testament that support his identity with the Messiah."

That Christ is the person who is spoken of here is confirmed by the fact that the New Testament twice expressly quotes the words *"light to the Gentiles"* from v. 6 and applies them to Christ (cf. Luke 2:32 and Acts 13:47). If Simeon, Paul and Barnabas made this identification, we can rest assured that, apart altogether from considerations of inspiration, they reflected the mind of the Apostolate and the New Testament Church as a whole.

If this confession, then, is attributed to the Lord Jesus Christ, in what circumstances and in what sense could such a declaration be made by him? We must at once acknowledge that there is no extant evidence that our Lord ever spoke these actual words during his ministry. Nevertheless,

there is evidence of circumstances in His life to which they would have been applicable and in which He expressed similar sentiments. Again, we do not have time to demonstrate this at length, but note that Isaiah himself foretold that this Servant was to be despised and rejected of men and to be a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. No small measure of His sorrow was due to the unbelief and enmity with which His own fellow Jews met Him. With what poignancy does He put the question to His remaining disciples, as He was being forsaken by many of His followers: *"Will you also go away?"* (John 6:67). Again, with what anguish does He weep over Jerusalem (Luke 13:34). In the words of Dr Gordon, Edinburgh, of last century:

"Nobody can read the New Testament account of Christ's ministry but be convinced that there was in the mind of Christ towards the Jews who rejected, crucified and put Him to death, a sentiment of compassion and regret corresponding to the language of this text."

Here, then, we have testimony in language more clearly expressed than in the New Testament itself, of Christ's inner pain over the apparent lack of success of His earthly ministry.

To question the appropriateness of attributing such sentiments to Christ would betray a failure in truly appreciating His full identity with us in His human nature, sin apart, as also of the full extent of His humiliation. Nevertheless, the recognition of His true humanity and its subjection to kindred temptations like ours does not reduce the element of surprise that even our Lord had to endure the humiliation and frustration of an apparently unsuccessful ministry. As F. B. Meyer states:

"When Jesus died, failure seemed written across His lifework. A timid handful of disciples was all that remained of the crowds that had thronged His pathway, and they seemed disposed to go back to their fishing boats. Man despised Him; the nation abhorred Him; and the rulers set Him at naught."

The surprise of this apparent failure is intensified when we consider His clear divine call (He was called even from the womb), His undoubted qualifications (His mouth was like a sharp sword and a polished shaft), the divine pledge of success (Jehovah was to be glorified in Him), and His constant and unstinting labours even to the point of exhaustion (He laboured and spent His strength). Hasty as this summary is, and must be, it nevertheless points up the shock and unexpectedness of this testimony of our Lord, when everything might have led us to expect the contrary.

This, I feel, has a valuable lesson to teach the church in general and the Lord's servants, in whatever capacity, in particular. In the secular world the *summum bonum* is success. It measures success by results. It cannot tolerate failure. Alas this same attitude has invaded the Church and many individual Christians judge their lives and their service according to these same principles. This is a dangerous and potentially destructive attitude and one that is ultimately grounded in materialism rather than in the Christian faith. What Christ's testimony here teaches us is that whilst all the essential elements for spiritual success, and prosperity in the life and service of His kingdom on earth may be in due order and proportion, as they were undoubtedly so in Christ's own case, yet the immediate or intermediate result may be failure. This should teach us to temper both our self-recriminations as well as our judgments of the Church at large.

We have to learn how to live and cope with such a situation. It demands humility, wisdom and faith to recognise that it may not be the Lord's purpose to grant us our desires or dreams of success according to our time-scale. Was this not how Christ Himself coped, humanly speaking when confronted with the sheer unbelief of the towns of Galilee — Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum?

"I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent and hast revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight."

(Matthew 11:25-26)

This is not to pour cold water on spiritual evangelistic zeal or vision. Neither is it a rationalisation of failure in order to encourage self-complacency or a policy of *laissez-faire*. As Dr Packer puts it so well in that little gem of his, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*,

"It is right," he says, *"to recognise our responsibility to engage in aggressive evangelism. It is right to want one's presentation of the gospel to be as clear and forcible as possible ..."*

But it is not right when we take it upon us to do more than God has given us to do. It is not right when we regard ourselves as responsible for securing converts, and link to our own enterprise and techniques to accomplish what only God can accomplish. To do that is to intrude ourselves into the office of the Holy Ghost and to exalt ourselves as the agents of the new birth ... For where we are not consciously relying on God, there we shall inevitably be found relying on ourselves. And," he warns, "the spirit of self-reliance is a blight on evangelism."

A signal example of faith

Let us now consider our Lord's reaction to His own situation in order to find guidelines for ourselves in similar circumstances. The writer to the Hebrews assures us that our Saviour has been tempted in all points such as we are, yet without sin and that, therefore, *"we do not have a High Priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities"*. The fact that He has passed through a similar experience ought to be a great comfort and encouragement to us. He knows where we are at and He knows where we hurt. Yet, however we emphasise His sympathetic capacity, we must not lose sight of His sinlessness. Hence we must not regard the foregoing confession of failure as indicative of unbelief. This was not so and could not be so. His confession was but a frank facing up to facts. We ought always to be honest enough to look at things as they are. Nothing is to be gained by shutting our eyes to facts or pretending that matters are otherwise. This can be done and ought to be done, however, without yielding to the temptation to unbelief or even to discouragement. He did not shut His eyes to the situation or gloss over it. Rather did He face it squarely, and honestly recognise His failure. He felt the pain. He felt its disappointment. But He did not yield to unbelief or despair! We do not see Him questioning His call, His qualifications, or His diligence. What a contrast to us in similar circumstances! In most instances this would be, almost certainly, our immediate reaction. He, on the other hand, commits the final verdict upon His work to God who alone can weigh matters as they really are and pronounce infallible judgment upon them. He leaves the fruit of His labours in God's hands who alone has the power and the sovereign right to make them efficacious as and when He sees fit. Furthermore, He reminds Himself of the work to which He has been called and despite initial disappointing results, He is confident of final success because of the power God has pledged to Him.

What faith our Lord manifests here! How true it is that Christ is *"the pioneer and perfecter of faith"*. He is indeed an example to us. The Christian life is a life of faith for *"we walk by faith, not by sight"*. Faith is the grace of graces.

"Love may be the crowning grace in heaven," says Watson the Puritan, *"but faith is the conquering grace on earth."*

The work of the gospel is pre-eminently a work of faith and we do not always, or even normally, see immediate results. We should note how frequently the Scriptures refer to the kingdom of God and its work in agricultural or horticultural terms, both of which demand time and patience before they yield their fruit. Likewise the work of Christ's kingdom requires patience, the patience of faith as the Apostle James reminds us: *"Behold the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth and has long patience for it"*. There will be a harvest but we must be prepared for the Biblical time-scale. The harvest is not at the end of any particular service or series of services that we may employ — no matter how well organised, how much prayed over or how powerful we may have felt them to be! The harvest is the end of the age and the Lord of the harvest will see to it that His good and faithful servants will get their just rewards. It is in this faith that we must labour and leave the results to God.

Such faith, however, needs to be strengthened and undergirded. One sure way of doing this is to do what we see our Lord doing here, namely, remind ourselves of the important nature of our work and the divine resources available for its accomplishment. We are engaged in the most glorious work, the work of the kingdom of God. We are contending for the kingdom of light against the kingdom of darkness. In the words of Dr Lloyd-Jones:

"You are standing for something that is noble and true and beautiful and right and holy in a world of shame and sin and darkness and vileness and foulness."

"You are the light of the world," says Christ of His Church and people. No doubt we often feel as if our light is but a mere flicker and scarcely affecting the pitch darkness of the environment in which we serve. But in the words of Lloyd-Jones again:

"I know," he says, "there is not much to show, but that does not matter. You are there, you are not the sun, perhaps, but you are a little match, but thank God for the light of a match where there is nothing but gloom and darkness and despair."

The work we are engaged in is a great work, a good work and worthwhile persevering in despite all discouragements. Let us beware of the temptation to weary in it as Paul enjoins: *"Let us not be weary in well-doing for in due season we shall reap if we faint not"*.

The tendency and the risk of fainting is ever with us. We are very conscious of the power of the darkness with its unrelenting and inveterate opposition. *"Every one that doeth evil hateth the light neither cometh to the light lest his deeds should be reproved,"* our Lord reminds us. *"The light shines in the darkness,"* says the Apostle John, but he adds, *"the darkness does not comprehend it,"* or as J. B. Phillips puts it, *"the darkness has never put it out,"* and we may add, it never will! God shall be our strength as our Lord says in v. 5. *"Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world."* Therefore, as Paul assures us, we shall be *"more than conquerors"* or literally we shall be super-conquerors.

Let us remember that, in the ultimate, the battle is the Lord's. He is the commander-in-chief and the director of operations as Isaiah reminds us: *"The government shall be upon His shoulder ... of the increase of His government and peace there shall be no end ... and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in His hand."* He Himself assured the disciples that *"all power in heaven and on earth"* had been given unto Him and that they, therefore, should go and disciple all nations. It was an enormous task to commit to such a small and insignificant band of men, yet the task and its achievement were not dependent on them or on their resources but on Him and His resources. That same task is still our responsibility but with such resources committed to the final success of our enterprise, why should we give up or hang back? Shall we not rather go in obedience to His command and in faith on His promise? If we fail or falter in responding with zeal to His commission, we run the risk of incurring His condemnation inherent in these words: *"I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nought."*

The sure promise of fruitfulness

The final consideration for countering this prevalent spirit of discouragement is the Sure Promise of Fruitfulness (cf. v. 6): *"And he said, 'It is a light thing that thou shouldst be my Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest bring my salvation unto the end of the earth.'"* The Father assures our Lord that not only will His past labours not be in vain but that He will be instrumental in the future for bringing salvation even to the remotest regions of the earth. This is the Father's response not only to His Son's disappointment but to His Son's faith. God delights in such faith for without faith it is impossible to please Him. On this point John Preston the Puritan says:

"There is nothing in the world doth so much win the favour of God as a great degree of faith," and again,

"The more faith you have, the more you bring glory to God; if there be much faith, there will be much fruit, it is the root of all grace. See John 15:8: 'herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit'. Get much faith then, if you will have much fruit."

The assurance that God is giving here regards the ultimate success of the gospel. Because it is in the unknown future, therefore, we may be tempted into questioning the relevance and benefit of this as regards the difficulties and discouragements of the present. But this would be a mistake. It is of fundamental importance for us and of great benefit to us to view our present struggles in the light of the gospel scheme as a whole. As Harry Blamires has put it:

"We are too small-minded readily to conceive of our individual course from day to day within the context of the sweep of human life from birth to death, and the sweep of human history from creation to its culmination. It could be plausibly argued that today, more perhaps than in any previous age, we have become too small-minded to be Christians. Our vision is too narrow, our outlook too limited for us to be able to live familiarly with the great insights of Christendom which see human history held in the hands of God and the human race acting out through the centuries the drama that began with creation, reached its turning point in the Incarnation and Crucifixion and will have its denouement in Heaven."

We need to recapture and be captivated by the vision of the ultimate success and glory of the cause of the Gospel, the cause of truth and righteousness, the cause - of Jesus Christ. As J. H. Thornwell has said: *"If the Church could be aroused to a deeper sense of the glory that awaits her, she would enter with a warmer spirit into the struggles that are before her."* The certainty of the glorious prospect that yet awaits the Church of Christ should indeed motivate us not only to endure the present difficulties but also to entertain a lively expectation of better things. Whatever our millennial stance, we can agree with John Stott when he says:

"Although we have little confidence in human achievement we have great confidence in the purposes and power of God. We are certain that error and evil are not going to be allowed the last word. On the contrary, truth and righteousness will triumph in the end. For Jesus Christ is going to return in strength and splendour, the dead will be raised, death will be abolished and the universe will be liberated from decay and suffused with glory."

Such optimism surely deserves a hearty "AMEN" and a jubilant "Hallelujah".

We have every warrant to expect this, because God Himself assures His Son that there is a favourable time ahead: *"In an acceptable time have I heard thee, and in a day of salvation have I helped thee"* (v. 8). These two preterite verbs must be viewed as prophetic futures. Furthermore, God is faithful to His promises and though for the present Christ may be despised and abhorred, the time will come when kings and princes shall bow down and worship Him (v. 8). This is the vision of the psalmist likewise when in Psalm 72 he declares:

"He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth ... His enemies shall lick the dust... Yea all kings shall fall down before Him: all the nations shall serve him."

The New Testament is equally optimistic when in the words of Paul's Epistle to the Philippians we read:

"Wherefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father."

This is the eschatology that is warranted from the Scriptures. It is a God-given eschatology, and one well calculated to revitalise and inspire a desponding Church or a depressed Christian and spur us all on in our endeavours to bring hope to a despairing world.

The Church at large and individual Christians too need to recapture this vision — the vision of faith. To quote J. H. Thornwell again:

**98"What the Church wants and every individual wants is faith — faith in her sublime vocation, in her divine resources, in the presence and efficacy of the Spirit that dwells in her — faith in the truth, faith in Jesus, and faith in God. With such a faith there would be no need to speculate about the future. That would speedily reveal itself. It is our unfaithfulness, our negligence and unbelief, our low carnal aims that retard the chariot of the Redeemer. The Bridegroom cannot come until the Bride has made herself ready. Let the Church be in earnest after greater holiness in her own members, and, in faith and love, undertake the conquest of the world, and she will soon settle the question whether her resources are competent to change the face of the earth."*

Fathers and brethren, may God grant us such vision and such faith! And in their light and by their strength let us face all the difficulties and take up all the challenges of the work of the Gospel at this present hour. Let us do so with the confidence of one of the greatest perseverers of all time, the Apostle Paul:

"Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as you know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord."

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