

March/April 2010

Message from the Pastor

Many sorrows shall be to the wicked: but he that trusteth in the LORD, mercy shall compass him about.
Psalm 32:10

It is impossible to reflect seriously upon life in this world without being struck by the many contrasts which it presents. There are the obvious contrasts between the rich and the poor, between the healthy and the ill, between the employed and the unemployed, between the young and the old. Then too there are the less obvious, we might even say the hidden contrasts, between those who know great happiness and those who know deep sorrow, between those who know relative inner peace and those whose minds are a battleground of anxiety, fear or depression. Some of these contrasts are themselves subject to change. A sudden change of circumstance may bring about a sharp and remarkable contrast in a person's standing and happiness.

The Bible is a book of contrasts. It acknowledges these and the many other contrasts with which we are all familiar. But chiefly it draws our attention to one contrast which runs like an unbroken seam through the lives of all in this world – a contrast indeed which affects everything else in our lives and which will determine our eternal destiny. That contrast is described in different ways, but in our verse it is put in terms of “the sorrows” which are experienced by “the wicked” and “the mercy” which surrounds the person who trusts in the Lord.

It is important that we understand what the Psalmist is NOT saying. He is not suggesting that the person who trusts in God is totally free from sorrows. That is the very reverse of the case. The godly know many sorrows too – sorrows which come from separation, from disappointment, from unfulfilled expectations, from pain, from sin. “Many are the afflictions of the righteous...” (Psa 34¹⁹) So sorrows come to the believer as much as to the unbeliever.

The difference, the essential contrast, lies in the response of the wicked and the godly to their sorrows. The man who is relying on himself, carving out his own way, living without a thought for God, will find, as his life proceeds, that his sorrows are increasingly “to” him. That is they cling to him. He cannot escape them. Each attempt to relieve himself of his sorrows, to find delight, pleasure, happiness outside of God leads to disappointment, and that disappointment cannot simply be shaken off. It becomes part of the man. It shapes his thinking, his spirit, his attitude. He may become cynical, pessimistic, hard, nonchalant. But he has no real joy, because he has no real source of joy. The channels which would let in the stream of joy are blocked. There is no fountain to go to – only more things, people, hopes – each of which will in the end turn to ashes and lead to further sorrows.

That of course was the experience so graphically and yet so tenderly depicted by our Lord in the parable which we call the *Prodigal Son*. Here was a son, who was plotting his own course, planning his future. How bright it seemed as he made those plans. How hurriedly he sought to put them into effect! And yet how short a time it was before he saw those plans disintegrate, and his great prospects turn to sorrows.

But what of the believer? He too has his portion of sorrows. Indeed they may seem to be, and, for the proving and purifying of his faith may actually be, equal to or even more than the sorrows of the unbeliever. But there is this great difference. The believer is trusting in the Lord – trusting that the Lord is going to provide for his present and future need, trusting that the Lord will be to him more than he has lost, trusting that the Lord will strengthen him in that in which he feels and is so evidently weak. And so instead of his sorrows being “to” him

- encompassing and overwhelming him - something else is encompassing him in every sorrow, something wonderful, full, comforting, strengthening – the mercy of God.

This mercy of God comes to the Christian who has lost his way and says, "You may, you must come back to my Word and trust me for direction in your life." It comes to the one who is perplexed, and reminds them of the scope and certainty of God's promises. This mercy comes to you, suffering, grief-stricken Christian and reminds you that your heavenly Father has allowed even this loss. This mercy softens your pain, mitigates your loss, clears the mists of your perplexity. In short the Christian is not hardened by suffering but softened and sweetened.

There are peculiar storms in the Indian Ocean... typhoons and monsoons. They are peculiar in that they do not move very rapidly. They hardly move at all from east to west, or north to south; instead, they play around in a circle. A sailor told of how before the navigators understood the characteristics of these storms, if they tried to come out of them, they foundered. "Now," he said, "when we run into a monsoon, we locate its centre, and we go around it. Gradually we narrow the circle. When we get into the centre, we are in a dead calm."

This is like God's will. Try to get out of it, and you will find it a destructive force. Get into it, and you are in a calm, and you find it is good, and acceptable, and perfect, as Paul states so clearly in Rom 12².

It is only as the Christian looks back that he or she can truly marvel at the way in which the Lord turned the circumstances which brought such sorrow into such occasions for proving His mercy. "The mercy of the Lord puts a wall of fire around the righteous, a cloud of goodness over him, a bow of promise before him." (W S Plumer)

If you are reading this, and have never learned to trust in the Lord, if you are still pursuing those alluring "joys" which will actually bring such enduring sorrows, then your great need and your great hope is to be found in turning from your wicked ways and asking God, through the Lord Jesus Christ, to have MERCY upon you for your sins. At the Cross He opened up such a flood of mercy for sinners that it can encompass the most awful sin of the most inveterate sinner. It can also encompass the terrible, but hidden sins of the respectable, moral, even religious sinner – self-righteousness, pride, covetousness.

1. Today Thy mercy calls us, To wash away our sin, However great our trespass, Whatever we have been; However long from mercy Our hearts have turned away, Thy blood, O Christ, can cleanse us And make us white today.	2. Today Thy gate is open, And all who enter in Shall find a Father's welcome, And pardon for their sin; The past shall be forgotten, A present joy be given, A future grace be promised, A glorious crown in heaven.
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3. O all-embracing mercy!
O ever open door!
What should we do without Thee
When heart and eye run o'er?
When all things seem against us,
To drive us to despair,
We know one gate is open,
One ear will hear our prayer.