

MOVING MOUNTAINS OR BEING BURIED UNDER THEM

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Philippians 4:10-12 But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at the last your care of me hath flourished again; wherein ye were careful, but ye lacked opportunity. Not that I speak in respect to want: for I have learned in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.

I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: everywhere and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and suffer need.

Jesus said that with the faith the size of a grain of mustard seed, we could say to a mountain, “Be removed and cast into the midst of the sea,” and it would be done! Here in East Kentucky we are always aware of, and confronted by mountains, and while we would occasionally like to move them, they are beautiful and serve the great purpose of sheltering us from the violent storms that much of the country experiences. However, when these mountains are disturbed by mining techniques, heavy rains can upend them and send them crashing into the valley below, covering houses and trailers in their paths. Mountains can bury you.

Problems can be mountains too; and if these problems become great enough, if not dealt with, they will bury you. Writing to his favorite church, Paul seems to be thinking of the problems with which he had to deal, problems that seemed to have no solution, problems that to him were mountains. He rejoices in the triumph he has had over these mountains—the triumph of faith in Christ.

Writing in the Pulpit Commentary, one author says, “We are able to receive Christ’s energy in proportion as we trust Him, as they who were cured by Him had blessing according to their faith. The energy is not in our faith, but in Christ. Still, faith is the channel of communication. Faith can move mountains, not by reason of its own inherent virtue, but because it invokes the Omnipotence of God...”

Faith in Christ can move mountains for us too, and if we have no faith, those very mountains, that look so menacing, be assured, will bury us.

I. THE FIRST MOUNTAIN THAT PAUL SEEMS TO HAVE FACED WAS THE MOUNTAIN OF DISCONTENT. In verse 11, he tells us how he overcame. “I have learned to be content.” Stripped of everything including his personal freedom, Paul had to depend upon the churches that he had founded for all his material support. Sometimes they failed to give that support. Sometimes circumstances kept them from giving it. In such a time, Epaphroditus had come with a generous gift from Philippi, and with the intention of his staying with and serving Paul in Paul’s imprisonment in Rome. Thankful to God for the help, Paul was sending him back to his native Philippi, though he would assuredly miss his friend and brother.

Discontent in Paul? No! Bitterness and despair and discontent had fled because Paul had a Lord who could remove mountains, even chains if necessary. As James Stewart called him, Paul was “A Man in Christ.” As such, he never bemoaned his fate,

renounced his faith, or allowed this mountain to cover his soul. He arose and said to this mountain of discontent, “Be removed and be cast into the midst of the sea.”

We live in an age of discontent. We stay dissatisfied with our homes, our schools, our jobs, our spouses, our children, our lives. Voices all around us remind us that we need something bigger, better, newer. And so, when we get what the voices tell us we so desperately need, we are appeased for a time, but we are never, never, satisfied. The great American novelist, Nathanael Hawthorne, suggested that we are like children chasing a butterfly that darts about and eludes the intrusions we make; but when we sit down quietly, the butterfly will often alight on us. In this age of discontent we need to say, “Be removed and cast into the midst of the sea.” Then we will say with Brother Paul, “In Christ, I have learned to be content.”

II. PAUL FACED ANOTHER MOUNTAIN THAT HE REFUSED TO ALLOW TO BURY HIM, THE MOUNTAIN OF SELF CONTENTMENT. William Barclay in his commentary reminds us that the Stoic Philosophers of Paul’s generation used that word *contentment* (autarkes) to mean “entirely self-sufficient.” To the Stoics ‘self-sufficiency’ was the highest aim in ethics. The good Stoic needed nobody. He had trained himself to kill all his emotions, and to kill all his desires, not unlike some of the world religions today.

Paul’s contentment was quite different than the contentment the Stoics taught. They would find contentment in themselves. Paul had traveled that road as a Pharisee. He aimed higher and worked harder to achieve his goals than any of his contemporaries. He needed no one. He would achieve his contentment in his self-sufficient Pharisaism. But Paul found his sufficiency and his contentment in Christ. His experience on the Damascus Road exposed to him his miserable existence, and showed him the new life that was his in Christ. The Stoics died to desire and died to emotion to gain self-contentment; Paul crucified his old life that he might find real contentment in his new life in Christ. As Barclay implies the mountain buried the Stoic and the Christian, through faith in Christ, saw the mountain removed. He writes: “The Stoic was self-sufficient; but Paul was God-sufficient. Stoicism failed because it was inhuman; Christianity succeeded because it was rooted in the Divine. The man who walks with Christ and lives in Christ can cope with anything.”

How about us? How about us? We wear hard faces thinking we are impervious to problems of others. We think our intelligence will give us the ‘good’ life; that our hard work will bring in its wake contentment; that our goodness will bring happiness in this life and heaven in that life to come; that earthly success will bring the praise of others and the happiness we have always desired: But we fail to realize that real contentment is centered in our relationship to God, from which all other relationships must come. We cannot afford to forget the self-contented rich man in Jesus’ story who lifted up his eyes in hell, and begged for just enough water to cool his parched tongue; and we need to remember the man who, nearing retirement, trumpeted his self-sufficiency only to be answered by these words, “You fool, this night your soul is required of you.” The mountain buried these men.

We must cry out to that mountain of self-contentment and self-sufficiency—“Be removed and be cast into the midst of the sea. Jesus will be my sufficiency.”

III. FINALLY, PAUL FACED THE MOUNTAIN OF HUMAN SINFULNESS.

In his pride and self-sufficiency, in his lust for power, in his arrogance and egotism, in his anger and loathing, Paul had committed a multitude of sins. Much of his sin was done in the name of God, although it had nothing to do with God and everything to do with Saul. He never says as much, but perhaps this ‘religious’ sin led to his killing innocent people. Robert Raines could easily have been speaking of Paul when he said, “Sin means that our reason is warped by our pride.” Paul’s reason was so warped that he would have done anything to destroy these pesky little followers of the Way.

Paul was self-sufficient. C.S. Lewis reminds us that self-sufficiency often makes us successful, but also makes it nearly impossible for one to turn to God. Christ Himself had to appear to Paul before Paul could turn to God. By faith, then, in Christ whom he had been persecuting, Paul had his sin removed and his blindness removed.

Is sin your mountain? Is your life so full of selfishness and of sin that you will not come to God? Augustine defined sin—“Sin: a thought; a form; a fascination; a fall.” If sin is your mountain, if you are unforgiven, if you have not repented, I want you to know that Jesus died on a mountain to remove your mountain of sin, and to cast it, forever, into the deepest part of the sea of His forgetfulness. Christ did this for you, and for you, and for you, and for you, and, thank God, for me.

Like Paul, we cannot be content, and cannot learn how to be content, until we have first eliminated the one sin that can destroy our eternal souls in hell—the sin of unbelief.

“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved, and your house.” So said Paul to one of his Philippian converts. We need to say to our mountain of sin in our lives, “In Jesus’ Name, be removed and be cast forever into the deepest sea.” And if we say it in faith, it will be done for us by our Savior. Amen.