

The Discipline or Hard Places

by A.B. Simpson

The sermon emphasizes the importance of faith, selflessness, and right ambition in overcoming difficulties and achieving our full potential in Christ.

Scripture: Numbers 27:1, Joshua 17:15

Topics: "Faith and Inheritance", "Overcoming Compromise"

Description

A.B. Simpson emphasizes the significance of facing hard places in life as opportunities for spiritual growth and discipline. He illustrates this through the stories of the daughters of Zelophehad, who boldly claimed their inheritance, and the children of Manasseh, who compromised and failed to drive out the Canaanites. Simpson encourages believers to embrace their rights in Christ and to pursue their spiritual inheritance with faith and determination, while also highlighting the vital role of women in ministry. He concludes by challenging the congregation to rise to their God-given potential and to confront the hardships that lead to spiritual victory.

Transcript

"And Joshua answered them, If you be a great people, then go up to the wood country, and cut down for yourself there in the land of the Perizzites and of the giants, if Mount Ephraim be too narrow for you."
(Josh. 17: 15.)

This chapter gives us three instructive lessons on the meaning of hard places and the discipline they should bring us.

THE CASE OF THE DAUGHTERS OF ZELOPHEHAD

"But Zelophehad, the son of Hopher, the son of Gilead, the son of Machir, the son of Manasseh, had no sons, but daughters; and these are the names of his daughters: Mahlah, and Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah. And they came before Eleazar the priest, and before Joshua, the son of Nun, and before the princes, saying, The Lord commanded Moses to give us an inheritance among our brethren. Therefore, according to the command of the Lord he gave them an inheritance among the brethren of their father."
(verses 3, 4)

Half a century before, Moses had made special provision for the daughters of the tribes inheriting their portion, under certain circumstances equally with their brethren, when there was danger of their patrimony

being alienated to another tribe, through intermarriage. The five daughters of Zelophehad came to Joshua and claimed their inheritance, in accordance with this provision of the Mosaic statute, and they received it at the hand of the great leader.

FAITH TRIUMPHING

This is a fine example of faith triumphing over difficulties and claiming its promised rights. This was the faith of Ruth, the Moabitess. She had found, through her mother's teachings, that there was an ancient provision of the Mosaic law entitling her to claim the protection of Boaz, as her nearest of kin; and although it cost her the sacrifice of her sensitiveness, and the risk even of her reputation, yet this daughter of faith dared to go forward and claim her rights, and place herself at the feet of Boaz. The consequence was that she became one of the honored line of the Saviour's ancestry and the aristocracy of the kingdom of God.

So God has given to us the redemption rights in His covenants of promise, and it is the part of faith to press through every difficulty, and, claiming our full inheritance, we shall receive it.

This is the ground on which we claim our temporal blessings, our physical healing, and ten thousand things which so many allow to go by default. They are ours by right of promise, and there is no generosity in giving them away, or letting them be lost, for they have already cost our Savior His precious blood, and the only recompense He asks is that we claim them and enjoy them. Let us press forward and claim all our great bequest.

THE PLACE OF WOMAN

There is a special suggestion in this passage of the rights of woman under the Gospel. We little realize, in western lands, how much Christianity has done for our sisters, and how high and glorious the equal place of honor and privilege which Christ has given to every daughter of faith. Has woman a right to speak in the Church of God? Certainly, if she has anything worth saying, and if she is living what she says.

We believe she has no right to exercise the special ministry given to man as the ruler and pastor of the Church of God. But the New Testament Scriptures have given her undoubted freedom to the ministry of testimony to the Gospel of Christ both in public and private, provided she does it in the modest way becoming to her holy womanhood.

These five dear girls in ancient Canaan were pioneers of the great army of brave and holy women whom Christ is sending forth today to minister to Him in the fields of Christian service, both at home and abroad. Their names are suggestive of the highest womanly qualities.

Mahlah means "melody or song." She represents the spirit of praise, which should always go in front of Christian life and spiritual movement.

Noah means "rest," and implies that spirit of gentleness, stillness and peace which is woman's peculiar adorning, even "the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which, in the sight of God, is of great price."

Hoglah, the third, means "festival," and fittingly expresses the spirit of joy which is the strength of every Christian life, and peculiarly the fruit of woman's sweet ministry. Every true Christian woman should be a joy-bringer, and make life a festival of gladness wherever she goes.

Milcah means "counsel," and suggests the spirit of wisdom, propriety, and good sense, without which all other womanly qualities fail of their object.

The true woman never speaks an indiscreet word, or does a thing which is out of place, but moves with such a sense of propriety and the fitness of things, such true instincts of rightness, tact and holy wisdom, that she is a sort of balance-wheel in the mechanism of life. The picture of Solomon in his ideal woman is sweetly fulfilled in her, "She opens her mouth in wisdom, and in her tongue is the law of kindness." Some of our sisters, I am sure, know women who do not meet this ideal.

Beloved, shall you be a true Milcah, and claim as your inheritance the mind of Christ and the wisdom which is from above, which is "first pure, then peaceful, easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy"?

Tirzah, the last of these five blessed women, means "benevolent," and represents the spirit of unselfishness, without which no woman can be true to her mission, or anything but a disappointment to herself and everybody else.

Selfishness is bad in anybody, but it is intolerable in a woman, for it is a perversion of the center of her being, and the primary object of her existence -- love. If woman is not love, she is a fallen angel and a melancholy wreck.

Dear sisters, shall you ask the Lord to give you, as your inheritance among the daughters of Zelophehad, this glorious life of praise, of peace, of joy, of wisdom, and of heavenly love?

THE CHILDREN OF MANASSEH

We have next an example of slothfulness and sinfulness, compromising with difficulty and yielding to defeat. We read in the twelfth verse that "the children of Manasseh could not drive out the inhabitants of those cities, but the Canaanites would dwell in that land."

This seems very strange. They could do much harder things. They could cross the Jordan at flood-tide. They could break down the walls of Jericho before the trumpet blast of faith. They could conquer thirty-one kings in five years, and subdue all the strongholds of Canaan. They could conquer Kirjath-Sepher, drive out Arba and Anak, and the giant races; and yet they could not dispossess a few Canaanite hordes in the small towns and villages of their inheritance.

This is passing strange. Alas! the secret is revealed in the next verse, and it is a very humbling one: "Yet it came to pass, when the children of Israel were waxen strong, that they put the Canaanites to tribute, but did not utterly drive them out."

THE SECRET OF FAILURE

Ah! that is the secret; there was some tribute in the question! There was some advantage to be gained by compromise. There was some loss or pain to be incurred by a brave, determined effort. And so they gave the Canaanites the right of way, with the understanding that they should pay for it. And they fancied for a while that they had made a good bargain.

But the day came when the Canaanites put them to tribute, crushed them beneath their feet, and placed them in an intolerable bondage, so that the Israelites became the slaves of them they had conquered. And

not only so, but they were led into terrible sins which brought upon them the displeasure and judgments of God, through the allurements and temptations of the tribes which they had tolerated.

This is just what Satan is doing today. He is getting people to compromise, for the sake of some benefit. God is trying to raise up a few uncompromising men. Half a dozen such men in Babylon were sufficient to shake the whole Babylonian Empire. One such man in Persia was stronger than Haman and all his plotting. And today, a handful of wholehearted, uncompromising Christians would do more to revolutionize society and evangelize the world than ten million half-hearted professors.

THE WILL

We learn from this chapter the real nature of our inability. The children of Manasseh could not drive out the Canaanites because they would not. Inability is usually unwillingness. Christ summed it all up when He said: "You will not come to Me, that you might have life." It is true there is a place which says: "No man can come to Me except the Father which has sent Me, draw him." But we must not forget it is added, "Every man, therefore, that has heard, and has learned of the Father, comes unto Me."

The Father is always teaching, and those who are willing to learn will find no difficulty in coming. The unwilling heart does not want to learn, and is unable, because unwilling. Any soul that will choose to come to Christ will find Christ there to enable him to come. Any Christian who desires to take any advance step in spiritual life has but to choose to take this step, and Christ will enable him to do so. God will give you just as much as you really choose to take, and He will not only do this, but He will also "work in you to will and to do of His good pleasure." If you really want to choose the right and holy, God will enable you to do so.

There is a beautiful expression in the story of Nehemiah, full of encouragement to timid hearts: "Your servants, who desire to fear Your name." Nehemiah was a little afraid to say he feared the Lord's name, but he could honestly say that he desired to fear it, and God accepted that choice, and enabled him to make it. Our gracious and all-sufficient Savior asks no more of us than we are really able to give. He puts His grace within reach of every human being, and if you will take it you can, and He will do the rest. The chariot of grace is passing by, and He is saying, in the language of one of old, "Is your heart right with My heart, as My heart is with your heart? Come into My chariot." And He will carry you in the chariot of His grace above all your trials, conflicts and difficulties, and make you more than conqueror, through His all-sufficient grace.

THE CHILDREN OF EPHRAIM

In the closing incident we have a picture of the way to reach the highest things. The children of Ephraim came to Joshua with a special request for a double inheritance. Their plea was that they were a great people, and that the Lord had blessed them hitherto. Their request was that they should receive part of the fertile valleys adjoining them, and held by the native tribes; and it seems to be implied that they expected their brethren to help them to drive them out. It really amounted to a request that they might receive a larger share from the inheritance of their brethren, and the help of the other tribes to win this inheritance.

Joshua's reply is full of keen sarcasm and shrewd wisdom. He does not deny their claim; he does not discourage their ambition. He says, "You are a great people, and have great power," and then he bids them to go and prove their greatness by doing something great, and thus conquering the enemy over against them. The mountain, he adds, is there, with its powerful Canaanites and its chariots of iron, and

they can have no grander opportunity than to conquer these hordes, and they can have just as much as they can take and prove their right to by valorous conquest.

They seem to have disliked his sarcastic and practical message, and they came back the second time. But he only sharpened his caustic words a little more, and repeated his former challenge -- that if they were as great as they claimed to be, they must prove it by some great achievement, and they could have all they could conquer. They seem to have dropped out of the drama at this period; and, as we learn from a former verse that they could not drive out the people of the land, but the Canaanites should dwell in the land, we have reason to fear that the greatness of Ephraim faded away "like the morning cloud and the early dew."

But the words remain for us, and a grander inheritance still awaits every brave heart that is willing to take up the challenge and climb the mountain heights of hardship and opposition.

There are several things in the plea of the Ephraimites that are fitted to fill us with humiliation. The first is their consciousness of their own greatness. This is very humbling and discouraging. "We are a great people!" It is a good deal better to have somebody else say this than to say it ourselves.

SELF-IMPORTANCE

We are all in danger of getting self-conscious. It is not only a blemish upon a noble character, but it is a source of great weakness. In conscious nothingness alone lies our strength and security evermore.

The next serious criticism is the reference to their claim for superior blessing. "The Lord has blessed me hitherto." Well, He has blessed other people, too, and if He has blessed you more than others it is only a stronger reason why you should do more than others, and it gives you no claim for a special possession or an easy inheritance won for you by others.

A true servant -- like the Seraphim -- hides his feet as well as his face with his wings, and presses forward to the things that are yet undone.

The third fault of the Ephraimites was that they looked for others to help them. They wanted somebody to give them an inheritance, and Joshua told them they could have it for the taking.

How much would any of us amount to if we were separated from the people that surround us and uphold us, and, stripped of our props, were sent out to stand alone? Take you out of this assembly, with its hallowed associations, and send you out to stand alone with God in some lone field, at home or abroad, and how much faith and courage would you have left? These are tests that have to come to us sooner or later. Every one must learn to lean upon God, and then God can trust him with human surroundings and supports, without the danger of his leaning upon an arm of flesh.

Ephraim wanted other people to conquer his inheritance for him, and there are lots of people today willing to accept the prizes of grace if somebody will give them without effort. They will allow the Lord to heal them if somebody will pray it into them and believe for them. They want to have sanctification and the baptism of the Holy Ghost, but they want to get it from somebody's hands or prayers. They are willing to work for Christ, but they want some one to prepare the work for them, and give it to them, like a piece of machinery, all wound up and ready to go. Put them into the pulpit, with a nice congregation, choir and salary, and they will go with considerable regularity for awhile. Start them in some routine of Christian work, and buoy them up with sympathy, appreciation, encouragement and praise, and they will do nicely.

But send them out to the regions beyond; set them down, like Paul and Silas in the prison of Philippi; plant them in a wilderness of isolation and desolation, and they will shrink into nothing, and wither like a fading flower. There are people who are as tall as church spires now, who will scarcely be fit for doorsteps in the temple yonder. Thank God that He does send us out alone sometimes, and prove how much of Himself we really possess.

But there are, on the other hand, some very cheering things in this message.

RIGHT AMBITION

The first is that God is not displeased with our holy ambition, and does not discourage our high aspirations. If we want a larger work, God will give it to us. We may step out into the regions beyond, and conquer as much territory as we dare. There is nothing to hinder any ambitious Christian starting out tomorrow and starting a mission in Central China that will be as much blessed as the China Inland Mission, if he dare to take it from the Lord.

There is nothing to hinder any earnest Christian, who has the call, from starting a work in the slums that will be as fruitful as the Water Street Mission. That began with nothing, and you can begin with just as much capital if you take the Lord for it.

When James and John came to Christ with their mother, asking Him to give them the best place in the kingdom, He did not refuse their request, but told them it would be given to them if they could do His work, drink of His cup, and be baptized with His baptism.

Do we want the competition? The greatest things are always hedged about by the hardest things, and we, too, shall find the mountains, the forests, the Canaanites, and the chariots of iron, as well as the Ephraimites.

Hardship is the price of coronation. Triumphal arches are not woven out of rose blossoms and silken cords, but of hard blows and bloody scars. The very hardships that you are enduring in your life today are given by the Master for the explicit purpose of enabling you to win your crown. Do not wait for some ideal situation, some romantic difficulty, some far-away emergency; but rise to meet the actual conditions which the providence of God has placed around you today.

Your crown of glory lies imbedded in the very heart of those things -- those hardships and trials that are pressing you this very hour, week and month of your life.

The hardest things are not those that the world knows of. Down in your secret soul, unseen and unknown by any but Jesus, there is a little trial that you would not dare to mention, that is harder for you to bear than martyrdom. There, beloved, lies your crown. God help you to overcome, and sometime to wear it!

Oh, how the days are telling as they pass by! The Spirit is testing us and trying our fitness for something beyond.

Each of us is conscious, as we meet people, of measuring them mentally and physically, and determining their character and weight, and what they are fit for. And how disappointed we are when those whom we have trusted do not come up to our standard for them, and we feel that they are not fitted for the place we had given them in our thought! And how pleased we are when they do come somewhere near our ideal of them!

Beloved, this may help you to understand how God is watching you from the heights above, not with the eye of a critic, but as a loving Master, and when we rise to His standard how His arms will enfold us! How He will press us to His bosom, and rejoice as He can say: "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Lord." "Sit down with me upon My throne, even as I have overcome, and am set down with My Father upon His throne!"

God grant we may all press forward to the high places He has prepared for us, and meet the moments that come as witnesses that shall come back someday to testify either for or against us in the great day of eternal recompense!

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