

Nevertheless Afterward

by J.R. Miller

Life is full of growth and change, and every act has consequences. We must consider the afterward in all our choices and trust God with our trials.

Scripture: Hebrews 12:5

Topics: "God's Discipline", "Growth through Trials"

Description

J.R. Miller emphasizes the concept of 'afterward' in his sermon, illustrating that current hardships and trials are not the end but rather a part of God's greater plan for growth and character development. He explains that just as a gardener prunes plants for future fruitfulness, God disciplines us for our ultimate good, leading to a harvest of righteousness and peace. Miller encourages believers to view their struggles from a distance, recognizing that the painful experiences of today can yield beautiful results in the future. He reminds us that life is a continuous journey of learning and that every trial carries a blessing, urging us to trust in God's loving purpose even when we cannot see it. Ultimately, he reassures us that there is always an 'afterward' filled with hope and understanding.

Transcript

Things are not finished--as we see them today. Tomorrow they will appear larger, greater. The bud you see one morning in the garden--will be a full-blown rose in a little while. The brown seed you dropped in your window-box, will be a beautiful plant by and by. Wherever there is life--there is growth. Every act has its consequences. We cannot foretell what results shall follow from any choice we may make. We must always take account of the afterward, whatever it is we are doing, through whatever experiences we are passing. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews has a suggestive passage about chastening. He quotes from the Book of Proverbs: "And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as a son."

People sometimes chafe when they have troubles. They fret and blame God. "What have I done" they ask, "that God is punishing me so?" But God may not be punishing them at all. Chastening is not punishing. "Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Afterwards, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." The present is hard and painful--but there will be an "afterward." Chastening now; afterward, a harvest of righteousness

and peace.

The figure of pruning is used by our Master. He tells us that the wise gardener prunes every fruitful branch of the vine--the fruitful, not the unfruitful, branch. It is a wonderful comfort to suffering Christians to know that pruning is therefore really a mark of divine approval. "Whom the Lord loves--he chastens." There is a purpose also in the pruning. It is not any reckless cutting--the gardener knows what he is doing. Pruning seems destructive. Sometimes it appears as if the whole vine is being cut away. But there is an afterward--that it may bear more fruit.

One tells of a visit to a great hot-house, filled with wonderful clusters of luscious grapes. The owner said, "When my new gardener came, he said he would have nothing to do with these vines unless he could cut them clear down to the stock; and he did, and we had no grapes for two years. But this is the result." Stems and branches cut, bleeding, almost destroyed; afterward, a marvelous vine bending under its load of fruit.

It is only when we learn the truth about life--that we are able to live with faith and courage. Because they have not learned it, many people fall into despair in the midst of present disappointments and sufferings. They see only the hard things in their circumstances, and pains that make the days almost unbearable, the wrongs and injustices that are crushing them. They stand right in the midst of all the bitter trials--and see no light, no hope, no comfort.

We need to learn to stand away from the immediate present--and get a view of the experience from a remoter distance. We see only part of the experience, while we are in its midst.

A visitor to Amsterdam had heard about the wonderful church chimes--so the legend runs. He was told that he must hear them, whatever else he might miss in the old Dutch city. The tourist did not know how best to hear the chimes, so he went up into the tower of the church to get as close as he could to the bells. He thought he would thus be best able to get the full benefit of his visit. There he found a man with great wooden gloves, like hammers, pounding on a keyboard. All he could hear was the crash of the keys, the harsh clanging and the deafening noise of the bells above his head. He wondered why his friends had talked so enthusiastically of the chimes. To his ears there was no music in them, nothing but terrible clatter and clangor. Yet at that very time, there floated over and beyond the city--the most entrancing music. Men in the fields a mile or more away paused in their work to listen. People in their homes and travelers on the highways were thrilled by the marvelous notes that fell from the tower. The place to listen to chimes is not close to them--but a distance away, where the clangor has softened into sweet music.

So it is with the experiences of life. When we are in their midst--we hear only the jarring notes of pain, the bitter cries of suffering. "All chastening for the present seems to be not joyous but grievous." We are too close to it yet. But when we get farther away, when the sharpness of the pain is past, when the hardness is over and forgotten--the music grows sweet. Not until afterward comes, with its comfort, its alleviation, its peaceable fruit, its new blessing--do we begin to understand the meaning of the discipline of the experience that was so hard. Afterward it yields peaceable fruit.

It is only afterward that the meaning of many of God's providences can be clearly read. Now we see through a glass darkly; afterward we shall see face to face. Now we know in part; afterward we shall know fully. The things we think destructive and calamitous, are really blessings yet in their first stage, fruits still green and bitter, not yet ripened and mellowed.

Life is a school. All its experiences are lessons. God is educating us. School is not easy. All true education looks to the building of the finest, noblest character, in the end. It is especially so in God's school, for he is the perfect Teacher. His purpose is not to give us an easy time at present--but to make something of us afterward. Sometimes we chafe and fret, saying that God is harsh and severe, perhaps that he is even unkind. We cannot see that good ever can come out of the painful discipline. But perhaps we can only attain godly character, in 'the school of severity'.

There are some plants that would die in the warmth of a conservatory. They must be kept in the cold, if they would live and grow. One of the papers not long since told of a strange plant recently discovered in northern Siberia. It shoots up out of the ice and frozen ground. Its leaves grow on the side of the stem toward the north. Each leaf appears to be covered with little crystals of snow. On the third day the extremities of the anthers show minute glistening specks like diamonds. These are the seeds.

Is not this plant an illustration of many Christian lives? God seems to set them in beds of ice and snow--and yet they grow up out of the wintry cold--into lovely and wondrous beauty. We would say that the loveliest lives of earth, would be those that are reared amid the kindest influences, under summer skies, in the warm atmosphere of ease and comfort. But the truth is, that many of the noblest developments of Christian character, can only grow in the wintry gardens of hardship, struggle, and sorrow.

Trial, therefore, is not something meant to discourage us, to stunt and dwarf our life and mar its beauty. The snow plant would die in a tropical garden. There are lives that never could become Christlike and never could reach heaven without the discipline of severe affliction. No hardness is too severe--which teaches us to live worthily.

"To serve God and love him," says someone, "is higher and better than happiness, though it be with wounded feet, bleeding hands, and heart loaded with sorrow."

We must guard against the dreading of the cost of life's best things. If we cannot pay the price--we cannot get the blessings. We must have the sharp, biting winter--if we would get, by and by, the genial spring with its bursting blossoms. We must have the ploughshare cutting through the ground--if we would have the harvest of golden grain. There is no trial in our lives--which does not come to us as the bearer of good.

We meet a grievous loss, when we are not profited by the hard or painful experience that comes to us. We cannot see this today. It seems to us in the keenness of our sorrow, that nothing which may come in any afterward will make up for what we are now suffering. But if not in this life, then somewhere in the great eternal afterward we shall be able to say: "Now I understand." "All chastening seems for the present grievous; yet afterward it yields peaceable fruit."

Remember Joseph. He was cruelly wronged by his brothers, torn away from his home, sold as a slave, maligned and cast into chains--a dark beginning, surely, for a young man's life. Yet afterward came honor, influence, glory. It takes time to work out God's best things.

There is a story of a rabbi who met a child carrying a basket closely covered. "Tell me, little maid," said the rabbi, "what you have in that basket." The child answered, "If my mother had wished that any one should know what is in this basket, she would not have covered it up." If God had meant us to know all his plans of love for us, he would not have covered them up under experiences of pain and suffering. We may be sure, however, that for all our times of chastening and trial--there is an afterward, full of glorious good, waiting for us.

We miss a great deal by living so entirely in the present--and not thinking of the afterward. We are alarmed when we find ourselves in hard conditions and circumstances, forgetting altogether that these are only processes through which we must pass to reach fineness of character, sweetness of spirit, strength, courage, discipline, and all the qualities which go to make up the best life. We are too short-sighted when we are in trouble. We see only the suffering, the loss, the struggle--and do not think of the mission of the trouble and what is coming out of it. We should widen our vision, so as to take in the afterward as well as the present hour.

Life is all one piece. One experience follows another. God always loves us--loves us just as surely and as tenderly, when all things seem to be against us--as he does when all things seem to be favoring us. When trouble comes, no matter what its direct and natural cause--it has a mission: it comes to make us better, to cure us of some fault, to cleanse us of some blot, to make us gentler, to teach us to be trustful and strong, to make us more thoughtful and more helpful. Instead of vexing and fretting ourselves with the question how God can truly love us--and yet allow us to suffer, to endure loss, to be treated unjustly and wrongfully; we would better change our attitude altogether toward our trials, and ask rather what errand this pain or affliction has for us, what lesson it should teach us, what change it should work in us.

There is no trial in our lives that does not come to us, as the bearer of a blessing. We meet a grievous loss, when we are not profited by any hard or painful experience that comes to us.

The other morning, one told of an unhappiness which came from the loss of a friend--not by death--but by the friend's unfaithfulness. Well, it is hard when one has to lose out of one's life such a friend, who for years has seemed to be true and whose friendship has come to mean so much of strength, of companionship, of joy. But there will be an afterward, and we may be sure that when the afterward has opened its treasures into the lonely life, it will be seen that God is good and loving in just what he did. You do not know what poison was hidden in the cup--which you thought was filled to the brim with happiness. God took it out of your hand--to save you from a deeper, bitterer sorrow than that which you are now enduring.

You cannot see this today. It seems to you in the keenness of your sorrow, that nothing that may come in afterward, which will make up for what you have lost. But trust God with that. The future is long. It stretches away into the eternal years. If not in this life, then somewhere in the great eternal afterward you will be able to say: "Now I understand!"

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