

HUMAN SYMPATHY, THE BALM OF LIFE

by Lester J. Start

Undated

Job 19: 21. Have pity upon me, have pity upon me, O ye my friends; for the hand of God hath touched me.

If love to God and our fellow man is the greatest single commandment in Christianity, it follows that the lack of love in our relations with those about us is one of the greatest sins we can be guilty of. Most of us recognize this to some extent; we realize it is wrong to hate our fellow man and do him harm. But too many of us are guilty of a less obvious, but even more insidious violation of Jesus' law of love. It is by our lack of human sympathy and understanding when we observe the sufferings of those about us, - even when they are our friends. There is a strange, deeply rooted perversity in man's nature that makes him instinctively almost exult in the misfortunes of another. We do not exactly wish harm to our fellow man; but when misfortune visits him, instead of feeling a keen sense of human sympathy and pity for his adversities, we tend to feel slightly superior as if he deserved somehow his troubles, but we, by virtue of our goodness are immune.

The tragic story of Job's sufferings and his friends' attitude toward his misfortunes is the classic example of man's unintentional inhumanity to man. The story of Job is not alone a study of the causes of evil and suffering in the world; it discusses a second theme, - how does the righteous man act when he is faced by suffering. Job was a righteous and upright man, a perfect man, "one that feared God and turned away from evil," we are told. And yet he was called upon to endure all sorts of hardships and sufferings, for God wanted to test his faith. The adversary, who is called Satan had told God that Job was faithful because God did everything for him. No wonder he's so good. God then gave Satan permission to bring suffering to Job to test his faith. And Job passed all the tests with flying colors. When his property was gone, his children killed, and he himself covered with painful sores, he still kept his faith in God. He refused to forsake his faith and "curse God" who had so afflicted him. He passed the test - until his friends came to comfort him. But instead of comforting him, instead of extending to him a little sympathy for him in his misfortunes, they sat around him like crows mournfully examining Job's conduct to find out how he sinned to merit such suffering. The only cause for suffering that these friends could understand was sin. It is probably true that this is the cause for most of our suffering, but in Job's case, he was innocent of sin. But his friends would not believe him. Their comfort consisted in accusing Job of all sorts of sins which he did not commit, instead of showing him sympathy. No wonder that Job's sufferings now overcame him! The lack of sympathy and understanding on the part of his friends was the final straw that broke Job's spirit. It is hard enough to endure troubles, but when your own friends become accusers instead of comforters, when nowhere is there a kind or loving or comforting word, it is almost impossible to bear up under your sufferings. No wonder Job cried out "Have pity upon me, have pity upon me, O ye my friends." But there was no pity in them; when he asked for bread they gave him a stone.

It is this lack of human sympathy and understanding that broke the spirit of Job; and it is this lack of human sympathy and understanding that is the greatest cause of suffering in the world.

We can endure all sorts of trials and hardships if we have the sympathy and understanding of our friends; but when they desert us, our troubles become too much for us. But when we find a sympathetic spirit to listen to and understand our problems, how much easier they seem to bear, how much lighter the world becomes! The most effective tool of the psychiatrist in dealing with sick minds is this spirit of human sympathy and understanding. By taking a kindly interest in the worries and troubles and fears of his patients he is enabled to cure them of their phobias and sent them out to face life with renewed confidence. When our troubles become too much for us, we are often comforted by unburdening our woes to some sympathetic friend. Our difficulties may not be solved, but the very fact that someone is lending a sympathetic ear fills us with a renewed spirit of courage and confidence. [Lincoln's sympathy]. There are times when we can do nothing to remove the sufferings from our fellows. But one thing we can do always - and that is, to open our hearts to them in sympathy. There is nothing any of us can do to relieve the grief of a friend who has lost a member of his family; we all feel helpless in the presence of death to comfort the bereaved. And yet the clasp of a hand, the deep-felt sympathy of the heart, can do much toward making that person bear his sorrow.

One of the most stirring stories that has come out of this war is that brave act of sympathetic protest which the Hollanders showed for their Jewish friends. When the Nazis ordered all the Jews of a little Dutch town to wear yellow armbands, many of the Christians wore yellow armbands along with the Jews. It was the only way they could show their sympathy, the only way they could help. But how it cheered the spirit of these people, and strengthened the spirit of oppressed people everywhere to know that there are still those in the world who follow the Christian ideal of love toward their fellow man.

It is the spirit of human sympathy that makes us able to endure and conquer the troubles we find in the world; a little of this spirit on the part of Job's friends would have strengthened his faith in God that was being so sorely tried.

The original meaning of the word sympathy gives an interesting clue as to the true attitude which is implied by the word. So often sympathy seems to connote a sticky sentimentality instead of the feeling of understanding compassion. The word by its origin means fellow suffering; it is the attitude of one who enters into and fully senses the feelings of his fellow man. It implies, then, an understanding of what the other man is going through. The sympathetic person is the one who fully understands and appreciates the situation he is considering. Sympathy in this sense is the attitude we should follow in our dealings with all our fellow men. It is closely allied to the spirit of toleration, the Christian ideal that is suffering so today. Underlying all of these attitudes which are basically the Christian law of love, is this implication of the need of understanding.

It is a curious fact, that when we examine our unsympathetic and intolerant attitudes, we find that they are the result of a lack of understanding on our part. We are rarely unsympathetic or intolerant toward something we know. In the problem of racial prejudice and discrimination, we find that intolerance comes as people become suspicious of those they don't know. When someone says we ought to get rid of the Jews, or send the Negroes back to Africa, he never is thinking of any particular Jew or Negro that he objects to. It is very strange, but any member of a disliked people that one knows at all well seems to be an exception to the rule. We say that the

Negroes I have met and know seem to be nice people - but they are exceptions - these few may be all right, but in general, the race is undesirable. But why should only the few we know prove exceptions and not the others? Unless it means that we develop sympathy and tolerance only when we can understand the peoples about us?

The ideal of the brotherhood of man for which we all hope and pray can come about only as we develop that tolerance and sympathy that comes from, and understanding of, and concern for our fellow man. The sentimental ideal of a loving attitude that is without understanding, the mistaken idea that identifies tolerance with toleration and leaves the way open for the violation of the rights of others, is as dangerous as a frankly unsympathetic attitude. There are some things which cannot be tolerated. But an understanding, sympathetic attitude toward the problems of all mankind is the only basis for the brotherhood of man.

The lack of human sympathy in the world that makes so many cry out with Job "have pity upon me, O my friends," is all the more terrible because it is so often unintentional. We are seldom deliberately lacking in sympathy, but we are so full of our own concerns that we are indifferent to the troubles of others - and often even with the best of intentions we roughly brush the chords of a man's heart strings, because we do not see his real suffering. Job's friends were not deliberately cruel; they were pious, good men, but they did not understand how keenly Job was suffering, they did not sympathize with him. And their well meant efforts but caused him more suffering. (Branton's illustration).

There is a strange characteristic of human nature which prevents us from feeling sympathy for others. It is the natural reluctance of man to show his feelings as they really are, a reluctance to show his true nature to his fellows. We live in little shells that hide our real character. Our spirits are like those tiny sensitive creatures of the sea who make their homes in hard shells which protect their sensitive bodies from the dangers lurking in the seas. We in a similar way build shells about us that protect our tender feelings from the harsh treatment of the world. We hate to show our feelings, because when we do, we are likely to be hurt. The result is that we live our lives behind barriers, never showing our fellows what we are truly like except for times the barriers drop away in spite of ourselves; when for example a particularly moving motion picture captures the feelings of the audience - but when the lights go on how quickly the masks go back, how ashamed we feel to have shown some emotion. And while we keep our own feelings behind barriers we fail to see those of others.

The great charm of a young child is largely due to the fact that he has not yet felt the need for making barriers about his true feelings, and he appears as he really is. And it is one of the unfortunate tragedies of growing up, that the child begins to hide his true feelings, because he finds that some of his most cherished ideas are laughed at and hurt. Those of us who are fond of dogs find them so agreeable because they are always the same, open and friendly, no matter how we treat them.

The Christian spirit of sympathy and understanding can be effective only as it works to break down these artificial barriers between individuals - barriers which prevent us from seeing what we are really like. Love between men is essentially the breakdown of these shells, these

boundaries that fence in the personality, leaving the heart open to be wounded; but in love there is a faith and a trust that knows that he will not be hurt. This is the spirit of man which is really the stoutest, for it stands without protection open to be injured, but ready to help another by his sympathy and love. (Illustration about Catholic priest and church graveyard).

If we are to help bring about the brotherhood of the world, let us resolve as did this man to move the barriers that shut in our true feelings. Only then will we be able to show the human sympathy and loving understanding which destroys fears and enables men to live together in peace and happiness. Only through sympathy and love can we see our fellow man as he is stripped of the false barriers that hide us from each other; and as we understand each other, then we can hear the cry of the suffering in the world, the cry of Job, "Have pity on me, O ye my friends" - and in heeding that cry, follow the call of Jesus.

[Man in mist?]

Prayer.

We thank Thee, O God, that Thou art ever present whenever we turn to Thee, that Thy spirit is seeking ours even as we seek Thee. Help us, O God, to clear our hearts and minds so that we may better find Thee. May we find wisdom to know that we need Thy strength that comes from Thy abiding love at all times. Thy Spirit gives us courage when we are beset by sorrows and troubles; help us to keep an abiding sense of Thy Presence when our hearts are free from care.

In the vision of Thy goodness, O God, help us to rid ourselves of those meannesses that are displeasing in Thy sight. From selfishness and greed, hate and envy, pride and false appetites, deliver us, O God. From conceit and pride, laziness and indifference, deliver us.

May we make the highest use of the gifts which Thou hast given us in Thy service. May we keep our eyes fixed to the heights; for we may climb the greatest heights without fainting if we don't look down, and keep our eyes on Thee. Help us to see through the multicolored confusions of the things about us to the white radiance of Thy eternity.

May we find in the contemplation of Thy love, peace in our hearts and strength to make the power of Thy peace felt about us. May we know that no one can move out of Thy protecting care.