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When Life Turns Impossible

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"They came to the iron gate" (Acts 12:10).

In one way or another, at one time or another, we all come to the iron gate. We find ourselves confronted with the question that a prisoner put to a chaplain in World War II. Having told the story of the empty and maddeningly futile feeling that came to him as one by one his friends were killed, or died, or mysteriously disappeared, he tied his mental package up in one hard knot and handed it to the chaplain: "What can a man do when there's nothing else to do?"

The iron gate of sorrow! The iron gate of suffering! The iron gate of disappointment! The iron gate of calamity! The iron gate of mystery! The iron gate of frustration! Life just will not let us escape it. What to do?

We need to look up at our iron gate, whatever it may be, and to deal with it as Christians. Specifically, there are three things that we should bear in mind.

1. **Realization!** We should realize that, however impossible life may have become for us, however blocked and frustrated we may appear to be, we still have a choice. "A choice?" I can hear someone say, "Why, nothing of the sort. Everything is shut up tight. I have no choice. That's what makes it so impossible."

Let me explain. The choice of which I speak is something deeply inward. No matter how dark and hopeless the outer situation, you can still choose what your inner reaction toward it is to be. When a man lost his sight through an accident, a friend, visiting him, said, "Our experiences do change the color of our lives, don't they?" Promptly the man replied: "Yes, and I propose to choose the color!" It was a magnificent remark. He had no choice now as to his physical sight, but it was his to decide whether blindness would turn his whole inner life into the black of a gloomy cynicism or into the white of a victorious poise and cheerfulness. He chose the white.

It is not what happens to us that determines our defeat or triumph: it is the way we react to what happens. Some people, when life turns hard, react rebelliously. They become resentful and violent in their thinking. They become bitter against people. They attack God. They may even go out and, in sheer spite, commit some act of immorality or crime.

Others react with self-pity. They think exclusively about themselves and brood narrowly over the personal discomfort that has come to them. A minister, for example, went to a young lady to whom he had to break the news that her husband, a sailor in the late war, had

been killed. She sobbed inconsolably. What grieved the minister was that the burden of her emotion seemed to be so pitifully self-centered. She cried: "But at twenty-five I'm too young to have my future end." She set her sorrow in a pathetically tiny frame, and that frame bore the label of self.

Others, again, react to the extreme tests of life with a stoical resignation. "What cannot be cured must be endured," is their philosophy. Far more admirable than bitterness or self-pity, it still is less than the finest attitude.

NO ONE NEED FEAR

My Lord, my God, I am indeed unworthy
Of all the gifts received from Thy good
hand—

Health, home, loved ones and friends, the
right to serve Thee—

The blessings of a free and favoured land!

The blessings of the Past and of the Present—
The countless gifts from out Thy boundless
store—

But greater still, the gift of my dear Saviour—
The gracious Lamb of God whom I adore!

And now the New Year's gates once more are
opening,

Bidding all to enter underneath Thy care!
As in the Past, the Present, so the Future—

Thy guardian wings of love are everywhere!

And they will cover me, and all who trust
Thee—

The saint, the sinner, all who on Thee call,
And will confess Thy name and will accept
Thee

As Lord and God and Father over all!

So whether bright or dark shall be the future,
The opening gates of still another year

Are opening for each trusting soul to enter—
And underneath Thy wings, no one need
fear!

—Cora Baker Hall.

Give the palm to those who occupy a nobly higher place. Their reaction to the severities of life may be summed up in an interesting comment that was made by an army officer in the midst of World War II. When something was said about bad weather, he replied: "Weather, in war, is always favorable, if you know how to use it." "If you know how to use it." There's the nub of the whole business.

A friend of mine tells of a cultured woman who never had much trouble until after she surrendered herself to Christ. Then it seemed as if all the troubles on which she had been in

arrears caught up with her. Her husband was unsympathetic with her Christian faith and testimony. Her daughter was taken to a mental hospital. Victoriously, prayerfully, trustingly, she held steady. She prayed her husband into a new and understanding attitude toward her faith. She prayed her daughter out of the hospital. One day the daughter, now quite restored and well, looked at her and said, "Mother, everything is poured on you. You get over one thing and then it is another. But you sit there and smile. You are wonderful." But she knows where the secret lies. It is not in herself. It is in the way she lets God into her troubles and permits Him to take the adversities and turn them into advantages.

Let us realize, then, that when life turns impossible on our hands we still have a choice. If it is not a choice of circumstances, it is at least a choice as to the way we shall react to them.

2. **Recognition!** There is another thing we can do when we look up and find our iron gate frowning at us: we can recognize that we still have a chance. The danger is that we shall take one look at the grim barrier, and throw up our hands as though all were lost. There is always a chance that what we face is a temporary obstacle rather than a permanent frustration. Even if it is permanent, perhaps God will show a way to make a flank movement and, in some measure, get around it. We may indeed encircle it and work it into our life pattern—hard and ugly though it be.

Such was the faith of St. Paul when he wrote to the Corinthians: "On every side I am harried but not hemmed in, perplexed but not despairing, persecuted but not abandoned, struck down but not destroyed—wherever I go I am being killed in the body as Jesus was, so that the life of Jesus may come out in my body". (II Cor. 4:8-10, Moffatt).

In an Ohio town, years ago, I stood by the bed of a Christian lady who had been laid low with a confining and chronic disease. Hers had been an aggressive and exuberant life for the Master and His Church. She had held some of the most responsible positions in her church. She told me that when illness first laid her low, it laid her emotions low, too. She had a kind of "gripe" session with the Lord. Her mood was not very sweet or victorious. Then, said she, the Lord got her ear one day and said something like this: "My child, if you will take this trustingly and sweetly, I can give you a larger place of service than you have ever had."

She told me how she took the gentle rebuke and permitted it to chasten her. From a mood of complaint she passed to a mood of conq

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