

My Stubborn Confidence

Paul S. Rees, D. D.

"Nevertheless I am continually with thee; thou hast holden me by my right hand" (Psa. 73:23).

The force of this text explodes out of that word "nevertheless." And don't, I beg of you, go to the dictionary if you want much help on the meaning of the word—not to the one that I have, at any rate. My fat "unabridged" solemnly declares that "nevertheless" is a "conjunction expressing adversative co-ordination." Which simply reminds me, for some curious reason, of the line in the nursery rhyme, "When she got there, the cupboard was bare."

"Nevertheless" is a word that comes in handy when you want to state a fact or conclusion that is quite different from the one that might be expected. This is true. Yes, and that is true. Yes, immediately the finger of logic or of expectation points in a certain direction. But no. Up pops this conjunction "nevertheless" to introduce a conclusion very different from the expected one. Roughly, it has the force of the simple phrase "in spite of."

"A BARREN NIGHT OF FISHING"

Take one example—out of the New Testament. In Luke 5 we have the fascinating account of the morning when the disciples, after a barren night of fishing on the Sea of Galilee, were told by Jesus to let down their nets on the other side of the boat. To an experienced fisherman like Peter it seemed a stupid thing, and in a polite way he said so. "Master," he said, "we have toiled all the night, and taken nothing." At that point in Peter's statement the expected conclusion is: "Sorry, Master, we know better than to try that. There's no catching anything out here this time." Was that Peter's conclusion? Certainly not. Instead, this word "nevertheless" comes crashing through: "nevertheless at thy word I will let down the net." The astounding consequences are known to every Bible reader.

Now back to this man Asaph who wrote Psalm 73 (or was it David who wrote it for Asaph?) where we must see and feel the meaning of "nevertheless" in this 23rd verse. "Nevertheless I am continually with thee; and hast holden me by my right hand."

The first thing to be noted is that it is the "nevertheless" of the puzzled mind.

As soon as I state it you will recognize the perplexity that had thrown the psalmist's thinking into a tumult. It has troubled people in every generation. It has bitten at you, I suspect, at one time or another.

Listen to this confession, beginning with verse 2, and reading from Moffatt's translation: "I almost slipped, I nearly lost my footing, in anger at the godless and their arrogance, at the sight of their success."

"SUFFERING SAINTS AND SUCCESSFUL SINNERS"

Now you have the problem. It is the old, vexing question of where in the world justice is when you see suffering saints and successful sinners. The noble in rags and knaves in riches! George Washington Carver barely able to pay his taxes, and Al Capone living like a maharajah!

The psalmist goes on, his mind more and more baffled and indignant. From thinking of, say, a pain-wracked Job, he turns to the disgustingly-healthy scoundrels that he knows, and he mutters; "No pain is theirs, but sound, strong health" (v. 5).

For this, the psalmist notes, they give no reverent thanks to God. On the contrary: "Vice oozes from their very soul, their minds are rank and riotous, their talk is mocking and malicious, and haughtily they lay their plots" (vv. 7-8).

As a sickening footnote to this ancient description of high-minded evil, let me give you a few sentences from one of Time Magazine's reports on the Kefauver crime investigation which held the national spotlight for so many weeks in 1951:

TODAY'S "MR CRIME"

"But 1951's ganglord no longer swaggers about escorted by squads of dark-coated goons with bulges under their armpits, nor is he openly followed by a string of expensive tarts. His clothes are no longer flashy; everything's gotta be in good taste. He is a home body. He lives comfortably but not fabulously in a respectable neighborhood, contributes to charity, hobnobs with cafe society, is friendly to politicians, sends his children to summer camps, and the big kids to college. He allows himself a Cadillac (usually registered in his wife's name), and a home in Miami."

Or this, from the same report: "The Mob's high-level executives have only scorn for the petty thieves, the park muggers, the petty embezzlers, the maverick holdup men who fill the nation's jails. The crime bosses do not go to jail; their boys seldom do. There is always a bondsman ready to spring them, and their money buys the highest-priced legal talent. Over the years the Mob's money has bought the men who do the arresting—sometimes even the men who do the judging."

Over against this incredible success in lawlessness take the persons you know who are having a struggle to keep soul and body together by honest toil. The winter weather closes in, and they have to go on public relief. The winter weather closes in, and that big-time gangster goes to his home in Miami. And about that time a huge, dark question mark arises in your mind: Where is the justice in all this? How can this make sense if there be a good God and if this be a moral universe?

It was precisely at this point that the psalmist crashed through with his stubborn confidence, his sturdy "nevertheless": "Nevertheless I am continually with thee; thou hast holden me by my right hand." It is as though the puzzled man were saying: "Lord, if there is no answer to my perplexity that comes out of logic, there is at least an answer that comes out of life. I know that wherever I go, there Thou art, prompting me, warning me, strengthening me, giving me at least the insight to see the difference between the false and the true."

My friends, you can't go much beyond that. The case of the flourishing sinner and the famished saint does not admit of a quick, easy solution. It is somehow part of the awful price we have to pay for moral freedom in a world where God wants our love and not merely

our fear. The philosopher Locke once asked: "Is it worth the name of freedom to be at liberty to play the fool? The answer of the Bible is Yes, since the purpose of liberty is wisdom, not folly; virtue, not vice."

"FAITH'S FINAL WORD"

But such an answer is not always easy to accept. Some mystery remains. Faith's final word for the intellect is that, whatever may be lacking in the answer as it appears to our minds, there is an answer within the wisdom of God. Meanwhile, the troubled mind of the trusting man finds rest not so much in an explanation as in an experience. "Nevertheless I am continually with thee; thou hast holden me by the right hand."

Consider, furthermore, the "nevertheless of the faltering heart. What the dark side of life may do to our mind is one thing. What it may do to our morale and our morality is another.

This phase of the matter comes in full view as one reads on from verse 10. Still thinking of the easy prosperity of the wicked, the psalmist says: "So people turn to follow them, and see no wrong in them, thinking, 'What does God care? How can the Almighty heed—when these, the godless, prosperously fare thriving thus at their ease?'" Then comes the fierce assault of cynicism upon the soul: "Tis all in vain I kept my heart from stain, kept my life clean, when all day long blows fell on me, and every dawn brought me some chastening."

Not long ago a newspaper columnist declared: "It is difficult to get people to do good deeds in the midst of a naughty world." I suppose he meant that our times are marked by such vast and violent evils that many a person feels his ideals crushed, his scale of values turned topsy-turvy, his spiritual aspirations smothered, his courage beaten down.

"MAN AGAINST THE DARKNESS"

As poor agnostic Professor Stace, of Princeton University, puts it, it's "man against the darkness"—no God, no meaning, no goal. In such a vacant, senseless world, what is the use of clinging to the virtues? What is the point of struggling for decency? What is the justification for right against wrong?

The composer of our text had gone just a little way down that steep hill of skepticism and cynicism. But only a little way! He caught himself. Just in the moment when his heart faltered, up rose the saving confidence of his faith: "Nevertheless, I am continually with thee; thou hast holden me by my right hand."

Evil may be rampant—so rampant that it makes goodness difficult. Still, it is evil. The volume of it does not change the viciousness of it. Theodor Mommsen is right: "History has a Nemesis for every sin." He should know, for history was his field. On the opposite side of the issue William James was right: "Every sort of energy and endurance, of courage and capacity for handling life's evils, is set free by religious faith."

Let your faltering heart remember: when wickedness is on the loose, you do not need God less—you need Him more.

Tackling our text from still another angle, we have the "nevertheless" of the chastened spirit. Beginning with verse 15, the psalmist takes us into his innermost soul and lets us listen to a confession.

He begins by saying, with some degree of satisfaction, that even his worst thoughts and fears and complaints had not been broadcast.

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