

"ARE YOU SUFFERING FROM SPIRITUAL ACROPHOBIA?"

Text: Ecclesiastes 12:5

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Our text comes from the passage in Ecclesiastes, which has been called "the noblest music of mortality." Just as 1 Corinthians 15 is the music of immortality, so this is the music of mortality. The writer believes that the mistakes we make in youth will deepen the afternoon shadows of life.

The man who wrote this tremendous passage clearly was one who did not subscribe to "the God is dead theology". Throughout his writing he urges man to feel a restraining sense of responsibility to God. Further- more, the God of Ecclesiastes is not simply a God who deals with the nation' Israel. He is a God who deals with all men in all the world. He is a universal and omnipotent God. He is the God who creates all things. "It is he that hath made us and not we ourselves."

As he presents "the music of mortality", he clearly sets forth the toll of the passing years. Let us see some of the significant but sobering details of the weakness that go along with age.

In verse 2 there is an expression: "the clouds return after the rain." What a picture of the sadness and sorrow of life. When Dr. Nehemiah Adams had to bury his little Agnes, as he came back home, a fresh wave of grief swept over him. He quoted the words: "the clouds return after the rain". The clouds of sorrow are dark and distressing. They have a way of returning. You can't always forget your losses'. The clouds do return after the rain!

What a description in verse 3. "In the day when the keepers of the house (the arms) shall tremble~ and the strong men (the legs) shall bow themselves. And the grinders (the teeth) cease because they are few and those that look out of the windows be darkened."

The expression "Those that look out the windows be darkened" can refer to the windows of the eyes. The window shades of the eyes with lashes like latticework of an oriental house, and the fringe of the iris regulating the light, would then be indicated. Literally, in old age we look out of windows that fail and are darkened. Or we can think of this expression symbolically. So often in later life, one of the temptations of old is to lose our individual interest in the things around us. The windows of life become darkened.

"And the doors shall be shut in the streets" (verse 4). Literally, in the Hebrew, "the double doors". I think of the double doors of life- double organs- the eyes, the ears, the nostrils, and the lips.

The writer goes onto describe the failure of the powers of enjoyment. The power to taste all pleasures, coarse or refined, now fails. Savory meats now pall upon the senses. Singing men and singing women cease to charm as "the daughters of music are brought low.'1

Then comes the increased power of little things to annoy. Even the light weight of a grasshopper seems a burden. What a picture of the man who comes to old age when his hair turns white, as "the almond tree shall flourish." Such weakness usually includes that "they shall be afraid of that which is high." I can still hear my beloved old mother-in-law, as we go to Graduation Exercises for our son, her grandson. "Let's sit down here. I don't want to climb any steps." The Psalmist indicates that once it was a thrill to climb up Mt. Zion. But now it is a drawback that the Temple stands on a hill. He now dreads going to the temple, because he will have to climb up, and he is afraid to: that which is high."

Before I lift my text out of its setting in the picture of old age~ let me describe~ in the eloquent words of Dr. De Witte Talmadge~ the beauty of old age. "If the voice quivers~ it is because God is changing it into a tone fit .for the celestial choir. If the hand trembles~ it is because God is unloosing it from worldly disappointments and clasping it on ringing harp and waving palm. If the hair has turned, it is only the night of heaven's dawn streaming through the scanty locks. The falling of the aged Christian's staff will be the signal for the heavenly gate to open. The scattering of the almond blossom will only discover the setting of the fruit ."

As we return to our text; let us realize that in many lives, both young and old, there is a fear of that which is high." Both young and old may suffer from spiritual acrophobia."

There are many kinds of phobias. Some people are terrified of being alone in open spaces. We call this agorophobia. On the other hand, there are those who have a fear of being shut in. This is known as claustrophobia. Could this be the reason some people stay from church? Then there is the fear of water, which is called "hydrophobia". Could this be the reason some people would rather be sprinkled with water, than immersed?

Dr. W.B.J. Martin has this to say about acrophobia, the fear of that which is high as he indicates that it can be spiritual acrophobia, not merely physical. "There is fear of scaling spiritual and intellectual heights, a dread of being outstanding and conspicuously first-class~, a fear of excellence. It reveals itself in the sneering way many people refer to highbrows and eggheads. Some folk make a cult of mediocrity; they just want to be average guys. Of the two mysterious entities called the highest common factor and the lowest common denominator, they prefer to realize the second. They have come to the conclusion that the happiest people in the world are those with average tastes, average attainments, and average ambitions. So they choose to live with their feet on the ground."

Dr. Martin goes on to give some reasons why people are "afraid of that which is high". One reason is the dread of loneliness. Some people are reluctant to express their unique-ability because it may set them apart from their friends. "It is lonely business to be out of step with the crowd." Some people would rather go along with average men than to stand alone, so they suppress the urge to climb.

Another reason for spiritual acrophobia is the question "Suppose we don't make it?" Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall; Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. He would not have had such a mess if he had stayed on the ground. Many a person is afraid to climb to excellence because he is afraid of failure. Rather than be true artists who continue to climb even when they experience failure, they prefer to be mere robots in life

To be absolutely honest, we will have to admit that some fear heights because of "plain laziness"! They would like to breathe the atmosphere of the heights but they are too lazy to climb. They remind me of the man lying on the ground with his eyes closed. When someone greets him, he is too lazy to open his eyes, and he says: "Tell me who you are so that I won't have to open my eyes." In disgust, the other man says: "That is the laziest thing I have ever heard. If you can beat that, I will give you ten dollars." The man on the ground still keeps his eyes closed as he says: "Roll me over, and put it in my back pocket."

Perhaps we ought to point out that there is always within us some measure of the natural man which is afraid of that which is high. Yet God challenges us to appeal to the new spiritual nature within us in the words of the Apostle Paul: "Set your affections on things which are above." (Col.3: 2.) There is a constant struggle between two natures, the one we were born with and the one we were born again with! One would pull us down; the other would lift us up. One is afraid of that which is high; the other endeavors to set affections on things which are above.

Paul makes it clear that while we are in the world, we must not limit our thoughts to the things of the world. If, as he points out in the third chapter of Colossians we are "risen with Christ" and our life is "hid with Christ", we need to set our affections of things that are above. We must not be afraid of that which is high, says the wise man of the Old Testament, and we must set our affections on things that are above, says the wise man of the New Testament.

I. THE CHRISTIAN MUST NOT SUFFER FROM SPIRITUAL ACROPHOBIA BECAUSE SUPREME AFFECTIONS SHOULD BE RESERVED FOR THINGS ABOVE

What are your affections? Someone has described them as wings of the soul. Have you ever seen an insect land on water? While they plunge their bodies into the water~ they keep their wings high out of the water. After sinning around they fly off with wings unwet. What a lesson for life! Here we have to be immersed in the cares and businesses of the world~ but we need to keep up doggedly the wings of our love~ faith~ and hope.

These affections, the wings of the soul, must not be squandered on the things of the earth. The things of the earth are the things that are in the world of which John speaks when he says: "If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him." r John 2:15. John goes on to describe them: "For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride- of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.

Although we are not to set our affections on the pleasures, the riche: and the honors of this world because they are unworthy, unsuitable, and unsatisfying, this does not mean that we are to live "otherworldly" lives. Some Christians forget that we are in the world. They want to escape from the strains and stresses of this world. This is why some people have called religion "the opiate of the people". I hear some Christians say:

"I don't bother to vote. My citizenship is in heaven." They should remember that our Lord reminds us that we have duties to Caesar as well as to God. I am, then, actually a citizen of two worlds. To ignore my responsibilities on this earth would be to make me so heavenly minded that I am of no earthly use!"

Yet I must not forget that while I am in the world, I must not limit my thoughts to the things that are on earth. While I must not repudiate everything in this world as being of no significance, I must set my affections on things that are above.

II. THE CHRISTIAN MUST NOT SUFFER FROM SPIRITUAL ACROPHOBIA BECAUSE SETTING YOUR AFFECTIONS ON THAT WHICH IS ABOVE IS WE PATHWAY TO VICTORIOUS LIVING

Someone has said that most birds are captured on the ground rather than in flight. The more you tarry on the ground, the more the fowler can ensnare you. If you do not get above, the things of the world will entangle us and we shall be birds caught in a net!

How we need to get up from the weedy ditches of life. How we need to rise up from the briery hedges of life. How we need to emerge from the smelly pits of life.

Dwight L. Moody used to describe the victorious life with this illustration: "I have known men who have been up in balloons, and they have told me that when they want to rise higher they just throw out some of the sand with which they ballast the balloon. Now I believe one reason why so many people are earthly-minded and have so little of the spirit of heaven is that they have too much ballast in the shape of love for earthly joys and gains. What you want to do is to "throw out some of the sand and you will rise higher."

Charles Spurgeon used another figure of speech to describe the elevation of affections on the part of the Christian who wants to live a victorious life "On board vessels it is a common thing to see a compass placed aloft. to be as much away from the cause of aberration as possible. This is a wise hint to us to elevate our affections and desires. The nearer we are to God, the less we will be swayed by worldly influences~"

III. THE CHRISTIAN MUST NOT SUFFER FROM SPIRITUAL ACROPHOBIA BECAUSE "SETTING OUR AFFECTIONS ON THINGS ABOVE" IS THE ONLY WAY TO PLEASE CHRIST.

If our Christian experience has caused us to be "risen with Christ" and "hid with Christ", then why not truly live with Christ? Our supreme loyalty must be to Christ. The man who loves father, mother, "life, children, brothers or sisters more than he loves Christ, cannot be a disciple of Christ. (Luke 14:26). Thank God I have never had to make this decision, but if I had to choose between my wife and Christ, I would have to take Christ!

Why is it necessary to love Christ more than the things of the world'?

First of all, we claim to be married to Christ. A woman is not fit to be married unless her heart belongs to her husband. I don't want my wife to love some other man more than she does me. In similar fashion, our Lord has a jealousy, which is the shadow of a great love. He wants us to love him with all the heart.

Unless you love Him and put him first, you will not be loyal to Him, Ardent love is required for faithful testimony. When our love begins to cool down then, like Simon Peter we "follow afar off", and soon we are ashamed to let people know that we are followers of Christ:

Furthermore, we will not grow in our spiritual life unless we love him supremely. If a child does not have an affection for books, he is not likely to become a good student. Unless we hunger and thirst for righteousness for the things of God, we will not be filled.

Finally, we will never do big things with a little love. We can take a lesson from David. He made tremendous gifts to the Temple. Why did he give such gifts? Let him tell us why: "Moreover because I have set my AFFECTION to the house of My God, I have of mine own proper good, of gold and silver, which I have given to the house of God, over and above all that I have prepared for the holy house." (I Chron.29:3)

IV. LAST OF ALL, THE CHRISTIAN MUST NOT SUFFER FROM SPIRITUAL ACROPHOIA BECAUSE SETTING OUR AFFECTIONS ON THINGS THAT ARE ABOVE IS THE ONLY WAY TO TRUE HAPPINESS.

The accumulations of the world do not provide true happiness. The things of life destroy while they please. There is no harm in possessions until you love them. It is the love of money, which is the root of all evil. Many individuals in life have destroyed themselves by the accumulations of life. Men demean themselves (defraud themselves) and destroy themselves as they seek to worship mammon. I can still hear a very wealthy man say: "I was happier when I had a two room house than I am with 20 rooms~"

The approvals of the world do not provide happiness. Many thousands have perished in unhappiness trying to secure the applause of the world. Think of Byron, Sheridan, and Burns. The achievements of the world do not bring happiness. The wilderness cannot satisfy the hungers of the soul.

Would you find true happiness? You will in the love of God and in the love for your fellow man expressed in service.

Don't be afraid of that which is high. Look up~ We have a throne on high. We have an unseen multitude above watching us. We have a living Lord who intercedes for us.

As you look up, a glimpse of heaven will help you bear the gloom of earth. The upward look makes the troubles of life seem insignificant. The Apostle Paul looked up and then said: "This light affliction".

The little boy held on to a string attached to a kite that was out of sight. A man said to him: "You cannot see it. How do you know it is there? The boy answered: "I cannot see it, but I feel its tug"

As we live in the darkness of this world, the blindness of this world, and the restlessness of this world, we may not be able to see the world above, but, thank God~ you can feel its tug~ And when you feel that upward tug, don't be afraid of that which is high, but set your affections on things that are above. When you do this, you will never suffer from spiritual Acrophobia.