

J.R. Miller:

There is a wondrous power of explanation in that word, "afterward." Things do not seem to us todayâ€”as they will seem tomorrow. This is the key which the Scriptures give us for the solution of the strange mystery of affliction. "No chastening for the present seems to be joyousâ€”but grievous; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness." There are many things in God's way with his people which, at the time, are dark and obscureâ€”but which the future makes clear and plain. Today's heavy clouds, tomorrow are gone; and under the bright shining of the sun, and the deep blue of the skyâ€”the flowers are sweeter, the grass is greener, and all life is more beautiful. Today's tears, tomorrow are turned to lenses through which eyes, dim no longer, see far into the clear heavens, and behold the kindness and radiance of God's face.

One reason for the present obscurity of life, is our ignorance, our limited knowledge. We know now only in part; we see only in a mirror darkly. We have learned merely the rudiments, and cannot understand the more advanced and obscure things. A boy enters a school, and the teacher puts into his hand a Greek bookâ€”and asks him to read from the page before him; but he cannot make out a word of it; he does not know even the alphabet; it is a page of hieroglyphics to him. But the years roll on; he applies himself with diligence to the study of the Greek language, and by patient degrees masters it. The day of his graduation comes, and the teacher again places in his hand the same page that puzzled and perplexed him on the day of his entrance. It is all plain to him now; he reads it with ease, and readily understands every word; he sees beauty in every line. Every sentence contains some golden truth. It is a page of the apostle John's Gospel: the words are those that fell from the lips of Christ himself, and are full of love, of wisdom, of heavenly instruction. As he reads them, they thrill his soul, and fill his heart with warmth and joy. Every line is bright now with the hidden fires of God's love. Riper knowledge has cleared away all the mystery, and unlocked the precious treasures.

We are all scholars in God's school. The book of providence is written in a language we do not yet understand; but the passing years, with their experiences, bring riper knowledge, and, as we learn more and moreâ€”the painful mysteries vanish. When we stand, at length, at the end of our school-days, the old, confusing pages will be plain and clear to usâ€”just as childhood's earliest lessons, though hard at the time, are afterward to ripe, manly wisdom. Then we shall see that every perplexed line held a golden lesson of wisdom for our hearts, and that the book of providence is but another of God's many testaments of love.

In one of George Macdonald's poems, a little child runs to her father, as he sits absorbed in his mental conflicts, and asks, "Father, what is poetry?" â€” "One of the most beautiful things that God has ever made," he replies. He opens a book, and shows her some poetry. She looks at it eagerly; but a shadow comes over her face, and she says, "I do not think that is so pretty." He then reads aloud some verses, and the reading pleases her; but still she cannot understand how poetry is beautiful. Her mother is beautiful, the flowers and the stars are beautiful; but poetry is not like any of these, and she cannot see the beauty in it. Then her father tells her she cannot understand until she is olderâ€”but that she will then find out for herself, and will love poetry well.

But the father's lesson was more for his own puzzled heart, than for his child's. He, too, must wait until he had grown older and wiser, and then he would see the beauty he could not now see in God's strange providence.

We are all like little children. God writes in poetry which, no doubt, is very beautiful, as his eyes look upon it, and read its sentences; but we must wait to learn more before we can read the precious truths and golden thoughts which lie in the lines. In our sorrows and disappointments, godly men come to us, and tell us that the Lord does all things well; that there is some blessing for us in every bitter cup; that the strange answers we get to our prayers are the very best things of God's love, though so disguised. We open the Bible, and we find there the same assurances; but we cannot see the blessing, the good, the love, in the painful and perplexing experiences of our lives. To our dim eyes, all is darkness, and our faith is well-near staggered. Then our Lord's word comes to us, "What I do, you know not now; but you shall know hereafter."

"Afterward " is the key. Possibly in this world, certainly in the great "hereafter" of heaven, we shall see that every providence of God, even the providences that were painful, and that seemed adverse, meant blessing and good. No doubt, we shall see, too, that many of the richest blessings of our lives, as they stand in radiant brightness before Christ's face, have come from the experiences that were most painful and most unwelcome.

Another reason why many of God's ways seem so strange to us, is because we see them only in their incompleteness. We must wait until they are finished, before we can fully understand God's intention in them, or see the beauty that is in his thought.

We stand by the sculptor's block when he is busy upon it with mallet and chisel, and to our eye it appears rough, with no lines of beauty; but we see it afterward, when it is unveiled to the world, and it seems almost to breathe, so perfect is the finished statue.

A building is going up. There is now but an unsightly excavation, with piles of stones, timbers, and iron columns lying all about in confusion. Afterward, however, we return, and a fine structure stands before our eyes, noble and majestic.

Neither the statue nor the building was beautiful in its incompleteness. At present we see God's work in us and for us only in the process, not in its finished state. Only when it is complete, we shall understand why it was done in this way or in that.

The marble might complain of the strokes, which seem only to cut it away, wasting its substance; but when the statue stands forth, the marvel and admiration of all eyes—it would complain no longer.

The vine might cry out under the sharpness of the pruning-knife, as many of its finest branches are removed; but when it hangs laden with purple clusters, its cry of pain would become a song of joy.

"Now, the pruning—sharp, unsparing,
Scattered blossom, bleeding shoot;
Afterward, the plenteous bearing,
Of the Master's pleasant fruit."

Most things look different when viewed from different points and in different lights. Events and experiences do not appear the same when we are in the midst of them—and after we have passed through and beyond them. The after-view, however, is the truest perspective. This is especially so of life's sorrows—as we endure them, they are grievous; but afterward the fruits of peace appear.

In the Canton of Bern, in the Swiss Oberland, a mountain stream rushes in a torrent toward the valley, as if it would carry destruction to the villages below; but, leaping from the sheer precipice of nearly nine hundred feet, it is caught in the clutch of the winds, and sifted down in fine, soft spray, whose benignant showering covers the fields with perpetual green. Just so does sorrow come—as a dashing torrent, threatening to destroy us; but by the breath of God's Spirit—it is changed as it falls, and pours its soft, gentle showers upon our hearts, bedewing our withering graces, and leaving rich blessings upon our whole life.

We should learn to trust God—even when the hour is darkest. The morning will surely come, and in its light, the things that alarm us now will appear in friendly aspect; and in the forms we have dreaded so much—we shall see the gracious face of Jesus as he comes to us in love. The ploughings of our hearts—are but the preparation for fruitfulness. The black clouds that appear so portentous of evil—pass by, leaving only gentle rain, which renews all the life, and changes desert into garden.