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The Importance and Value of Experience

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"And not only so, but we also rejoice in our tribulations: knowing that tribulation worketh stedfastness; and stedfastness, approvedness; and approvedness, hope: and hope putteth not to shame; because the love of God hath been shed abroad in our hearts through the Holy Spirit which was given unto us" (Rom. 5:3-5).

Experience Gained Through Tribulation

"Stedfastness (worketh) approvedness".

There are different translations of the word which is here rendered 'approvedness' - in the Authorized Version it is 'experience', in the Revised it is 'probation' and in the American Revised it is 'approvedness' - showing that it must be a rich word, a word of some meaning and content. It really means approvedness as the result of testing, and I really think that the Authorized Version gives the best rendering in using the word 'experience', because from the same root we get our word 'experiment' - a try-out and the result; and that is just the essence of the word here. *"Tribulation worketh stedfastness"* (or patience, if you like) *and stedfastness* (or patience), *experience*".

In the New Testament, not only in statements but in many ways, experience has a very high place indeed in the work of God and is of very great importance and value in God's sight. Experience really is the quality or essence of stature, of maturity. There is a grave absence of outstanding leaders in our time in every realm, leaders of whom we could say that they are head and shoulders above their fellows. There was a time when it was otherwise. In politics and statesmanship, in art and literature and music, there are great names, but they very largely belong to a past generation. Such men are not with us today, and there is this serious lack of leadership, of men of stature, men who count. The

Lord places such great importance upon experience, and shows that there is nothing that can be a substitute for it, and that He Himself is prepared to take very great and serious risks with lives in order to work experience into them.

It does sometimes seem that the Lord is experimenting with us. Whether that is a right way to put it or not, what I mean is right. Because of its very great value and importance, the Lord is prepared to put us into situations in which the most serious consequences may develop, in order to get this one thing; for here is the heart of usefulness and value to Him - experience.

Experience Cannot Be Transferred

Experience with God is much more than knowledge. We may be very greatly informed, and have a great deal of knowledge, but, lacking experience, our knowledge will remain purely technical information. Experience is more than knowledge. It is also far more than human cleverness. Clever people may be able to do a lot of things and seem to be successful. The absence of this quality of experience will find that their structures will sooner or later come crashing down, for there is no body there. Experience is something that we can never inherit, nor can it be transferred from one to another in any other way; it has to be bought. It is therefore the sole possession and property of the individual who has it. It is something very personal. If it had been possible for the Father to bring His own Son, the Lord Jesus, to the designed and determined end in any other way, He would have done it. The only way was experience: "...yet learned (he) obedience by the things which he suffered" (Heb.5:8); He was made "*perfect through sufferings*" (Heb. 2:10). Even Jesus Christ (and I speak in a certain sense) had to buy His experience. He had to come to the full end, or the end of fulness, to be made perfect, made complete, by the way of experience.

The Holy Spirit, with all that the gift of the Spirit means of enduement and endowment and instruction and strengthening, is not a substitute for experience. We are very often found asking that certain things shall be done for us by the Holy Spirit which the Holy Spirit will never do. He has to lead us into experience. It is the only way in which He can answer our prayers. Many prayers are answered through experience. You ask the Lord to do something, and He takes you through experience, and you arrive at the answer in that way. You had not meant that, of course: you wanted the Lord to do the thing there and then as a gift, as an act; but that would have been merely objective, something given, whereas He wants to make it a part of yourself, and so He answers prayer by some experience. 'Stedfastness worketh experience', and if there is no experience, what is the good of anybody or anything?

So then, experience is of greater importance than being delivered from tribulation. 'Tribulation worketh experience'. Oh, how often we have asked the Lord why He allowed this and that, or why He did not do this or that. Why did He not hinder Adam from sinning? Why has He not stopped the world in so many things that have had most terrible results? Experience is very largely the answer.

Experience the Very Quality of Service

Experience is very important because, after all, it is the very quality of service. When we come to real life, and we are really up against things and the issues are of the greatest consequence, we do not want just information, we want experience, and we go where experience can help us. Is that not so? Thus experience is the very body and quality of service and usefulness to the Lord.

Bunyan, in his allegory, has a man called Experience, one of four shepherds on the Delectable Mountains - Knowledge, Experience, Watchful and Sincere - all, of course, parts of one whole

ministry, and not to be regarded as separate. There is a knowledge which, if it is in the hands of or in company with experience, is all right, and one does not discount the value of knowledge; but it has to be experimental knowledge, it has to be in the company of experience. And of this Experience, the shepherd, what does Bunyan say? A visitor to the country of the four shepherds described him like this: 'Firmly knit in form and face, a shrewd but kindly eye, a happy readiness in his bearing, and all his hard-earned wisdom most evidently on foot within him as a capability for work and for control'. That is a good definition of experience: 'capability for work and for control', 'hard earned wisdom'. He was a shepherd, and we know that the Bible idea of the shepherd is different from ours. A shepherd in our land has to go scouring for sheep to try to get them together, using dogs and other means to collect them. A shepherd in Syria only had to go to a certain spot and begin to sing a psalm and the sheep knew his voice and gathered to him, and he could lead them anywhere while he was praying his prayer or singing his psalm. They knew his voice and followed him. And so it is today: leadership is shepherdhood; shepherdhood is leadership. But experience is the shepherd, therefore experience is the leader.

Of course, it will entirely depend upon whether we are concerned to be of the greatest value to the Lord and to others, or whether we are self-centred. If we are thus concerned, this matter of experience will make appeal to us, but if otherwise, then what I am saying will not amount to anything. But here it is, the Lord puts value upon the matter of usefulness, and whether we are mentally interested in it or not, and whether or not our hearts have become as yet bound up with it, we cannot get away from the fact that the Lord is actively engaged on this work; He is seeking to make us useful. What is the why and wherefore of experiences, of the difficult and hard way that God takes us, and of the way in which He, so to speak, takes terrible risks with us? He does indeed seem to take risks. He risks our rebellion, He risks our bitterness, He risks our misinterpretations of His dealings with us, He risks our 'kicking over the traces' and breaking away and running off. He risks a lot when He puts us into difficult situations, but He thinks it is worthwhile for experience; for even our wrong reactions will make for experience in the long run. Even our rebellion and bitterness He will sovereignly control, and we shall come to know we can learn something along that line; we shall be able to help, instruct and advise where such help is acceptable and needed. Yes, He is doing it all to get experience, to make of us not professional pastors but men who are shepherds, 'firmly knit in form and face', with that 'shrewd but kindly eye', that readiness, with all the 'hard-earned wisdom', to be of help to those who need it. That is what the Lord is doing with us, to bring experience.

Experience Practical, Not Theoretical

So experience is the very sum of what is practical. It is experiential, experimental, it is the practical side of knowledge. That is almost too obvious to need saying. Tribulation is very practical, very real, you cannot get away from that. The demand for patience in tribulation is very practical; that is no theory. And if the object of the tribulation in its working of patience is steadfastness, is experience, it is exceedingly good. We may lack many other things, we may not have great knowledge or learning, great capabilities or cleverness, by which the world sets such store. Should it come to our being tested by this world's standards of ability, and we were to answer and say, 'I have only experience', it would not go down at all. They would say, 'What degrees have you, what examinations have you passed?' To say that we have had some experience would not be sufficient, whereas if we had all the other without experience, we should very likely be acceptable in this world. But it is not like that with God. The examinations that are held are on another basis altogether. We may not have many things, we may not be very much, we may be despised when it comes to what we have accomplished in the academic way, what titles we carry, what degrees we have - we may not be much in that world, but remember that God puts a very great deal more importance upon experience than upon all the rest,

and that is a thing we can all have. From the least to the greatest, we can all have experience, and because in the sight of the Lord it is so important, He sees fit to let us know a good deal of tribulation. "*Tribulation worketh... experience*".

Have you got the full meaning of that word that is translated into our English word 'tribulation'? Tribulation is a picture word in the Greek - the picture of a farm instrument that we call the harrow; and you know what we mean when we say we have had a harrowing experience. Oh, the tearing and the cutting and the lacerating from the harrow! That is the word here, literally, actually; the harrow going over our backs, and it works experience. Experience is of such value.

Experience of Eternal Value

What more can one say other than that it must be of *eternal* value? The value must be eternal, otherwise life is an inexplicable mystery and an enigma. The time may come when you young people, having passed through deep experiences and having bought your experience at great price, and thus having in your possession something of very great value, find that younger people do not want your experience, nor think anything at all of it, and never consult you. When what you have through deep experience has very little outlet in this world, a very limited scope for expression, what an enigma! All this you have gone through, all you have bought at so great a price, what is the value of it? It must be eternal. God must be working to get something with a longer range than this poor life. With tribulations increasing perhaps as you get older, what is it all for? Well, He is working with a longer view, and there must be something that counts with Him beyond time, and so He allows the tribulation to produce patience, and patience experience; "Whether there be knowledge, it shall be done away"; but experience shall abide and serve in the eternal ages.