



A Bottle In the Smoke

Many lessons in the Bible are taught by way of metaphor; our present passage is an outstanding example.

~ Psalm 119:83

"For I am become *like* a bottle in the smoke;
yet, do I not forget thy statutes."

The bottle spoken of is a container made of goat-skin, sewn up with hair on the outside, with animal fat smeared over the inside seams. These bottles were used mostly for carrying water; however, they were also used for storing wine, and for fermenting milk into yogurt. In Matthew 9:17 there is a reference to these bottles, "Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved." –The bottle and the wine.

The reference is to the fact that the old bottles could not stand the pressure of the fermentation process; however, the new ones were still pliable and would stretch. Eventually, the old bottles would dry out and crack with age, as animal skins do. Animal skin bottles are still used in the middle-east. They are an excellent way to transport water. Two of these bottles will drape over the contour of a camel's back or one over a donkey. Their flexible nature makes them ideal for taking the vibration and shock of transport.

That is a bottle; but, what is a "bottle in the smoke?" People living in the Bible lands had no chimneys in their houses --in many places, they still have no chimneys. Many of the houses in the middle-east are much the same today as they were in the days of our Lord. These bottles would be hung from the rafters, near the top of the building, where there was a hole in the roof to let out the smoke from the open fire.

A bottle hanging up there would age very rapidly. In fact, it would age before its time; the heat would tend to dry it out; while the soot would cover it. Eventually, if it hung there long enough, it would become very dry and crack, becoming useless. Some say that a bottle hung in this area was being misused and mistreated. Others say, that it was normal to hang a bottle in the smoke. I am inclined to think that both could be right --they were misused, and it was normal.

Now, one more step. David said that he *felt like* a bottle in the smoke. He compared his trouble and hurt to a bottle hanging in the smoke. In fact, in verses 85-88 it appears that there were some who would have killed him if they could have. By the way, this should be used to help you form a realistic rating system for your own trouble --is anyone going to kill you? If not, the next lower category of distress is given in verse 84-86; and, that is wrongful persecution. Of course, that may be an erroneous

nomenclature; perhaps, all persecution is wrong. I tend to think that it is wrong. Persecution is wrong.

A leather bottle hanging in the smoke was not only covered with soot; but, it dried out, became parched, and shriveled up. Without question, there was a lot of black soot thrown upon David; yet, in addition to that he, no doubt, felt the effects of age, sickness and sorrow. Time itself, and wear and tear will collect their tax from the strongest and stoutest of people. David had been an outdoors person, and now he is withered and his color gone. So, David is in a low estate --a despised and broken vessel; however, though his affliction was great, it had not driven him from his duty, "Yet, I have not forgotten your statutes" (Psalm 119:83).

Whatever the outward trouble is, we must not cool in our affection toward God. Affliction, trouble, and persecution are things we can expect; may they never drive us from God, but, rather, to God.

The passage brings us three realities: First, God's people must have trials. Secondly, God's people feel their trials. Thirdly, God's people do not forget God in their trials.

First, God's people have their trials --they get put in the smoke.

This is an old truth. It has never been God's design that his people should be untried people, or that they would always have peace and safety, and be free from sickness and the pains of mortality. Trials are part of our fortune and they are to be expected. "The path of sorrow, and that path alone, leads to the land where sorrow is unknown." There is no hedging on that bet. "Blessed to us is the night, for it reveals the stars."

Note well the biographies of all the patriarchs, all the prophets, the apostles and martyrs --all of those whom God has made into vessels of mercy, and you will see that they were all like bottles hung up in the smoke. If Joni Eareckson Tada were not a paraplegic, no one here would know who she is. Job said, people are "born into trouble as the sparks fly upward." Good people must have their trials; they must expect to be like bottles in the smoke.

Sometimes these trials arise from the poverty of their condition. It is the bottle in the cottage which gets into the smoke --not the bottle in the palace. The king's palace knows little smoke. It is the bottle in the less stable, less adequate dwelling of the rural folk in the village that gets into the smoke. God's people have often not been wealthy people. We all know that there is more smoke where there is no adequate chimney, and where the house is of less noble construction. Not too many of God's people are found in the high ranks. In fact, not too many people are in the high ranks --period! And so, the poverty of Christians exposes them to much trouble.

Yet, "God has chosen the poor in this world, rich in faith, that they should be heirs of the kingdom." Poverty has its privileges, for Christ lived in it; however, it also has its down-side --it has its smoke, it has its trials. While it is true that money cannot buy happiness, it does help people to be unhappy in comfort.

Many of God's people, however, are not poor; and even if they are poor they are often not poor all the time. That is to say, they very often have seasons that are better than others. This brings me

to remark; our trials frequently result from our comforts. What makes the smoke? Well, it is the fire over which the person warms his or her hands, and heats the dwelling. So, our comforts also furnish us with ample troubles. You see, the fire is not without its smoke. If you are parents, your children will bring you joy; but, they will also cause you some smoke damage. The rich person has more to care for than the poor person. If business is big --so is the worry of looking after it. The comfort of fire brings the inconvenience of smoke. Where there is fire, there is also greater likelihood of smoke.

Then again, the ministry is a great fire by which Christians warm their hands; but, the ministry has much smoke with it. That is to say, there are times that you can come to Church and have your heart lifted; and there are also times when you can come and have all rejoicing removed from you by the solemn searching of the Spirit of God. You can come to church and be like a bottle in the smoke, as the Holy Spirit "grinds away" at your life with the statutes. Sometimes it is the "Comforter" who makes us uncomfortable. So, the pulpit that is intended to give you fire for warmth and comfort, will also give you smoke. Sometimes your church will be your joy, and at others it must be your responsibility.

Another thing; the poor bottle in the smoke stays there for a long time --until it gets covered with soot. It often takes a lot of trouble to make us into what God expects us to be. No sooner are you out of one smokey place and you are in another. Each hour has its own cares, and that was the case with David. If this is the way it is with you, you are not alone.

Secondly, Christians feel their troubles. They are in the smoke; and they are like bottles in the smoke. There are some things that you could hang up in the smoke for long periods and they would never change. They do not dry out, nor crack, and you can wipe them off. But that is not the way with leather bottles; leather bottles are the worse for the wear. So, Christians feel their trials; they age from them, just as do the leather bottles.

Now, some folk feel that grace makes a person free from the pain of suffering. Some have gone so far as to suggest that the martyrs did not feel much pain --let me assure you, they did. And Christians are not wrong in letting their distresses be known, even our Master did when he said, "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?" When he died for us you can be sure that he felt the pain of it.

"Paul was a chosen vessel (bottle) of the Lord" (Acts 9). We, also, are bottles; 2 Timothy 2:21 speaks of the Christian as a vessel unto honor. After all, it is *feeling* a trial that makes it a trial. Sometimes other people are a trial to us. God intended that trials be felt. David said, "I am like a bottle in the smoke." The bottle in the smoke gets very sooty --so do Christians. We may think very highly of ourselves before our trials, and more appropriately after.

A bottle in the smoke becomes black. Remember the words of John the Baptist? "I'm not worthy to unlatch his shoes?" Or Paul, "I am the chief of sinners, the least of the Apostles?" "Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved (Yes!) a *wretch like me*" Many people sing it; many fewer notice what it is they are singing.

The bottle is an empty bottle, unless the owner of the bottle decides to use it. Then there comes a day when he is finished with it; the bottle becomes worn, cracked, dry, sooty, tired, and old. The owner buys a new bottle --the old one having served well. No one can expect to serve forever. And that brings us to our third and final thought:

Christians, though they have troubles, and feel their troubles, do not, in their troubles or because of their troubles, forget God's statutes. God has two kinds of statutes: First, there are the statutes of his commands, of which it is said, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but not one jot or tittle of the law shall fail." So, David is saying, "In the midst of my trial I have not swerved." Secondly, there are the statutes of promise. Since people are "born into trouble," they need to learn to live in trouble; this, they can do with the statutes of God's promises.

This is the flip-side of the coin. Our trials are smoke. David was not a bottle in the fire, but a bottle in the smoke. His trials were not going to consume him, nor are your's going to consume you. The Bible contains gracious promises for the Christian; these promises are good when the Christian is going through trials. The final promise is we shall at last be out of the smoke and in the everlasting presence of Christ in heaven. "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, works for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" (2 Corinthians 4:17). "Though the outward man is perishing, the inward man is renewed day by day."

Suffering does shape and mold us, making us better, more profitable, and in the end it does a good lasting work, an "eternal weight of glory." It is not only the quickest way to Christian maturity, it is the only way.

Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote, "Sorrow is divine. Sorrow is reigning on all the thrones of the universe, and the crown of all crowns has been one of thorns. There have been many books that treat of the sympathy of sorrow, but only one that bids us glory in tribulation, and count it all joy when we fall into divers afflictions, --that, so we may be associated with that great fellowship of suffering of which the incarnate Son of God is the head, and through which He is carrying a redemptive conflict to a glorious victory over evil. If we suffer with Him, we shall also reign with Him."

This was written by a woman whose life was threatened many times for writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* prior to the American Civil War. However, her trials were, in large part, responsible for freeing the slaves -- though she ended up losing one of her own sons in the war. Once again, "Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother --and, in His Name, all oppression shall cease."

Trouble is not a reason for forgetting God. It is a reason to "team-up with" God.