

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, August 9, 1992, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

GENESIS 28:20, 21 and DANIEL 3:17,18

“Then Jacob made a vow saying, ‘If God will be with me, and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father’s house, then the Lord will be my God.’”

“If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and He will rescue us from your hand, Oh king. But even if He does not, we want you to know, Oh king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”

DON'T BARGAIN WITH GOD!

Often, we can grasp some rich gem of spiritual truth by taking one passage of Scripture and placing it alongside another, and then comparing or contrasting the two. This we shall attempt this morning as we contrast Genesis 28:20,21 with Daniel 3:17,18. Let us from this contrast learn three simple but helpful truths:

1. You can't dictate terms to God.

In the first of these two passages we are confronted by Jacob, one of the most crafty, contemptible characters in all of Holy Scripture. You remember how he had tricked his old father Isaac into bestowing upon him the special blessing which should have been reserved for his elder brother Esau. In a smoldering rage, Esau vowed that as soon as their father Isaac was dead, he would kill his brother Jacob. When Jacob got wind of this, he left home at once and set out for the home of his uncle Laban, intending to remain there until Esau's anger had subsided.

The first night out, Jacob lay down to sleep under the stars. And that night, in a dream, he saw a ladder that reached up from earth to heaven, and on the ladder, angels ascending and descending; and he heard God speaking to him and challenging him to be a new man. Then, waking up in the morning, what do you think this mean, treacherous fellow attempted to do? He had the insufferable gall to try to make a bargain with God. In spite of his sin, he actually tried to dictate terms to God. Listen to him:

“If You will be with me, God, and watch over me, and give me food and clothing, and bring me safely back home again, then You will be my God!” Could you beat that for arrogance?

During World War II a story was told in England about a little girl whose father was serving in the British Army, and whose mother worked in a munitions factory. One night she was on her knees by her bedside praying, and this is what her mother heard: “Dear God, bless Daddy in North Africa, and please God, keep him safe, and bring him home soon. And bless Mummy as she works so hard in the factory and at home. And help my little sister Peggy, who has been

evacuated to the country, not to be too home-sick. And bless me, heavenly Father, and help me to do all the things I should. Now God, listen carefully, because I'm going to repeat all this at dictation speed!"

We smile at this story, and we despise Jacob who, in his sinful folly, attempted to dictate to God, and put God on the spot. God certainly did not answer Jacob's prayer the way Jacob desired. In fact, God really put Jacob through the wringer. He found that his uncle Laban was even more crafty than he was; and by a mean trick, Laban required Jacob to work for him for 14 years before he could marry Rachel, the girl he loved. And then years later, at the Jabbok River, in an awesome nocturnal duel, God wrestled with Jacob, dislocating his hip, so that ever after this man walked with a limp. But that was the decisive encounter, for Jacob's life was changed; he was reborn; and as a token of that fact, God changed his name from Jacob to Israel (Genesis 32:22-32).

Jacob tried to dictate his terms to God; but how often do we attempt the same thing in a slightly more sophisticated way? How often in prayer do we put the pistol to God's ear? "Lord, if only You will come through with this or that, then You can depend on me to serve You faithfully!" What despicable patronage! What arrogant blasphemy! God doesn't want our patronage; He wants our trust and obedience.

The first question of our Shorter Catechism asks: "What is the chief end of man?" That is to say, why are we here on this earth? Why did God create you as an immortal soul? Was it primarily that you might have material comfort and security? Certainly not. "Man's chief end is to glorify God..." And that may prove to be a very costly business indeed. It may involve bearing a heavy cross of suffering or sorrow or disappointment. But who are you, and who am I, to attempt to make a bargain with God and presume to say that we will only believe in Him and trust and obey Him if He comes through in the way we want Him to? If we adopt that attitude then we are really saying that we know better than He does what is best for us, and that is the ultimate blasphemy. We dare not attempt to dictate terms to God for the simple reason that we have no claim upon God whatsoever. He is in control; that is what the glorious doctrine of the sovereignty of God is all about. He is the Master; we are His vassals; and we must allow Him to deal with us and plan for us as He sees fit.

When the Confederacy was defeated in the Civil War, President Lincoln stood one day with a few of the Southern leaders as they looked at a map of the United States spread out on the table before them. One of the Southerners was attempting to bargain with the Commander-in-Chief, and Lincoln listened in silence for a few moments; and then, spreading his great hands over the map of his country, he said quietly, "Gentlemen, my government takes all!"

Remember that in your dealings with God. Remember that every time you pray. God demands all or nothing. You can't bargain with Him, and you can't dictate terms to Him. And after all, our ultimate security rests in the assurance that He does all things well!

How different was the attitude of Daniel and his two friends. You couldn't imagine their being in a more horrible predicament. They had utterly refused to worship the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. They would not deny the Lord their God by kneeling down in

front of any heathen idol. And so, the king, in a towering rage, bellowed to his slaves, "Heat the furnace seven times hotter than you've ever done before, and dump these young rebels into it, and we'll see if their God will deliver them!"

Tell me, how would you feel, and what would you say, if you knew that within a few minutes you were going to be barbecued? Remember, unlike Jacob, whose sin had gotten him into trouble, it was their faithfulness to God that had landed these young fellows in trouble. But how different is their reaction to that of Jacob! There is no attempt at bargaining either with God or with the heathen King Nebuchadnezzar, but only a glad outburst of trust in the God to Whom they had committed their lives. Listen to their testimony:

"Our God Whom we serve is able to rescue us from the blazing furnace and from your power, Oh king. But even if He doesn't, understand this, Oh king -- we will not serve your gods, and we will never bow down before the golden image which you have set up." What a triumph of faith!

There is another tremendous page of Scripture on which we are shown a saint of God visited by trouble, one terrible blow after another coming down on him until his whole life was reeling; and at the close of day Job, with set face and clenched hands and bent head, was sitting there, remembering how his ten children had been taken from him through violent death; his possessions had all been snatched away - and this is what he whispers almost fiercely and desperately to himself as his shoulders heaved with sobs: "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the Name of the Lord be praised" (Job 1:21). And later, with his own body racked with pain and ravaged by disease, he could still exclaim, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him" (13:15).

Old Alan Cameron, the Scottish Covenanter, was lying, a prisoner, in the Tolbooth jail in Edinburgh one day 300 years ago, when suddenly the door of his cell burst open, and in rushed soldiers, and one of them was carrying something. "Look!" they said, uncovering it. It was the head and hands of his own son, Richard, who had been martyred for Christ. The old man staggered, as if struck in the face with a whip. The soldiers, in callous cruelty, said, "Do you know these?" And now I quote from the official chronicle of this sad event: "Taking his son's head and hands, which were very fair -- being a man of a fair complexion like himself -- he kissed them and said, 'I know, I know them; they are my son's, my own dear son's; it is the Lord; good is the will of the Lord, Who cannot wrong me nor mine, but has made goodness and mercy to follow us all our days!'" What a victory of faith!

Are you at the place in your spiritual life where you still try to bargain with God, dictate terms to Him like Jacob? Or have you reached the place of maturity and unconditional surrender, where, like Daniel and his friends, and Job, and old Alan Cameron, you can say, "The Lord can deliver me if He wants to, but even if He doesn't, I will still trust Him, for He knows what is best for me, and He never makes a mistake!"

2. God always has the right to say "No."

He reserves that right just because He is God. He is the only One Who knows everything

and is therefore in the position always to do what is best for His creatures. Sometimes we think we know what all the answers should be, but what a sorry mess we would make of life if God did not sometimes step in and overrule and say “No” to some of our cherished plans and purposes! I sometimes shudder to think what would have happened to me had God answered all my prayers in the way I desired!

This raises the whole problem of “unanswered prayer,” which perplexes so many people; although we must remember that in the long run, no true and earnest prayer is ever left unanswered. No one ever calls on God in vain. It is just that sometimes the answer is so different from the blessing requested that we fail to recognize it as an answer.

Don’t ever forget that our Lord Jesus did not have all His prayers answered in the way He first requested. You remember how in the Garden of Gethsemane He prayed three times that the “cup” of suffering might somehow pass. Here is the Holy of Holies where we see our Savior, in all the glory of His humanity, shrinking from the unspeakable agony of the Cross. He didn’t want to die any more than any virile young man of 33 wants to die. If you were condemned to be martyred tomorrow for your loyalty to Christ, you would undoubtedly pray God tonight, by a divine miracle, to deliver you from that untimely death; and there would be nothing cowardly or unworthy about such a request.

Our Lord prayed, as one commentator reminds us, first of all standing. The second time He was kneeling; and finally, as He prayed that the cup might pass, He was lying prostrate on the ground.

But at the end He gained faith’s victory — “If it be possible, let this cup pass; nevertheless, not My will, but Thine be done!” (Matthew 26:39).

Fair-weather faith says “IF” -- “If God will be with me, and do all sorts of good things for me, then the Lord shall be my God.”

True faith says “NEVERTHELESS” -- “Not my will, but Thine be done!”

Notice further: When Jesus had proven, by this triumphant confession of faith, that He was utterly surrendered to the will of His Father, do you realize what God enabled Him to say? Listen! “The cup which My Father has given Me, shall I not drink it?” (John 18:11). The hideous death by crucifixion was not the crowd’s cup, nor the High Priest’s cup, nor Pilate’s cup; it was His Father’s cup; and therefore, there was a purpose, a glorious and loving purpose that made it necessary for Him to drink it. Always remember this: You always change the contents of the cup by changing your mind as to Who gives it to you! One person drinks the cup of sorrow or crushing disappointment, and he becomes cynical, rebellious and bitter, because he thinks it is the devil’s cup he has been forced to drink. Another person drinks the same cup, and his character is enriched through his very suffering, because he knows it is the cup his heavenly Father gave him to drink.

Paul, in writing to Philemon, calls himself “the prisoner of Jesus Christ.” He might very correctly have said, “I, Paul, the prisoner of Nero, the fiendish Roman emperor”; or, “I, Paul, the

prisoner of the Jews who plotted and schemed to get me behind these bars.” But no. “I, Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ.” Paul knew that Nero and the Jews were only small-part actors in the drama. Paul’s life was completely in the hands of Christ. He was where he was because his Lord had ordained it so. Paul was not a worthless pawn in some cruel game; he was a child of God, utterly surrendered to his Lord, and therefore he knew that he was exactly where Christ wanted him to be.

Sometimes when we pray that a cup may pass from us, it just doesn’t pass at all; we are called upon to drain it to the bitter dregs. At such an hour, and in such a situation, is it not fortifying to remember that God reserves the right to say “No”; that He knows better than we do what is for our lasting good; and that even through our Calvary experience, He is molding and enriching our character, and blessing the world through our tears?

3. You must never fail in your discipleship.

Dr. W. E. Sangster, the distinguished English preacher, tells how once, in the early years of his ministry, a lady in his congregation came to him one night almost in hysterics. An awful tragedy was about to befall her daughter. “Mr. Sangster,” she said, “our Jessie is going to lose her sight, and you’ve got to tell her!” The next afternoon, when he went to visit the girl in the hospital, she already knew. As he entered the large public ward where her bed was, she saw him and cried out, “Mr. Sangster, God’s going to take my sight from me!” Breathing a hurried prayer for guidance, Dr. Sangster walked down the long room, and as he came alongside the girl in the bed he said quietly, “Jessie, I wouldn’t let Him, if I were you.” “What do you mean?” she replied incredulously. “Well, Jessie,” he said, “you say that God is going to take your sight from you. Could you pray for the next month this prayer each day, ‘Lord, I’m going to give You my sight?’” And she did. Jessie became stone blind. But in her blindness, she became a far finer and committed Christian, and a far nobler person than she ever was when she possessed her sight. She became a Church Sister, working on the staff of a large downtown Methodist church in London. A Seeing Eye dog became her constant companion and guide; and, as she put it so tenderly, “I tell the people what God tells me in the dark!”

Doesn’t that kind of commitment to the will of God humble us, we who so often try to bargain with Him, and dictate terms to Him, and tell Him how we think our lives should be ordered?

It is only as we surrender fully to the will of God as it is revealed to us in His Word by the Holy Spirit that we can ever hope to know the “victory that overcomes the world” (1 John 5:4). It is only as we “trust and obey” that we become possessed of “the peace that passes all understanding” (Philippians 4:7).

A little boy, the child of Christian parents, put his finger right on the spot. In swift succession two families of his acquaintance had each suffered tragic loss through the death of a dearly loved child. One family were Christian people, belonging to the same church as his own parents; the others were unbelievers. The boy said to his father, speaking of the Christian family, “Of course, Dad, it’s not so bad for the Johnstons, they know what to do.”

And so do we!

In the calm of the noontide, in sorrow's lone hour.
In times when temptation casts o'er me its power;
In the tempests of life, on its wide, heaving sea,
Thou blest "Rock of Ages," I'm hiding in Thee.

AMEN.