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MS-4787: Abba Hillel Silver Papers, 1902-1989.

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

Reel
145

Box
51

Folder
30

The Toil of Men, 1918.

"THE TOIL OF MEN"

"Thine is not the duty to complete the task, neither art thou free to desist from it, and know that the reward of the righteous is in the days to come."

Today men think perhaps more than they have ever thought before, and the thoughts of men sometimes become strange vagaries. Some times men will leave the highway of every day problems and wander among the byways of unfamiliar speculation. These byways of thought are well-known to the professional seeker after truth but they are seldom traversed by the feet of the common man. Some times however, even the common man leaves the highway of life and wanders among these byways of strange speculation. Sometimes he is driven into them by the very heat, the press and the jostle of the road, and the common man seeks among these unfrequented avenues of thought, answers to the questions which crowded in upon him, almost imperceptibly as he toiled along the highway of life.

Sometimes he seeks among these unfrequented regions, shall we say, the wisdom or the faith that will solve his perplexities, that will read for him the many disturbing riddles of the road.

Sometimes he seeks in these almost unexplored regions, a restful shade for a wearied foot, a healing balm for a bruised heart ---and sometimes he seeks God. For remember, my friends, the road of life is not always smooth and even, the road is not always kind to the wayfarer. Frequently the road ceases to be a road at all, and,

as if lashed by some wild fury, it becomes a torturous, upward winding of crags and jagged rocks and pitfalls, - and sometimes in the heat and the dust of a scorching day, it becomes lost to the eyes of the hapless wayfarer. Sometimes the road seems harder for the heavy burdens which men carry and for their great sorrows.

The Pilgrim upon this road of life, will sometimes lose his only companion who falls by the wayside out of sheer weariness. And sometimes he will lose his only child. And then ~~xxxx~~ the burden of an unforgettable loss, which is the greatest burden of all, is laid upon him, so that small wonder that wandering men will sometimes in an errant mood, follow the beckonings of some strange lane of thot, to seek among its many windings, not only strength and inspiration for the journey ahead of them but also enlightened answers, soul-satisfying answers to the great questions which the road puts in them.

The questions which men ask themselves, men who carry the heavy burdens of life along the road, are these: Whither does the road lead? or Does it lead anywhere? Does it end at last in the green and open fields of peace and restfulness or does it twist in endless windings thru eternity? Is it a road whose goal is but another starting point? Is the road perhaps nothing but an enticement? If so, of what worth is the journey, of what worth is all this toilsome travelling, the painful plodding under heavy burdens?

Full many a man and perhaps you, yourself, struggl-

ing thru life, feeling its pain and its pathos, knowing its terrors and trials, has asked this query - "Great Guide of the World - What of the road? Is the goal which beckons us but a bewitching will-o-the-wisp, inveigling us into fruitless labor and hopeless wanderings?

Full many a man struggling upwards in the night, a prey to fear and doubt and weariness, has asked: OH Watchman, What of the Night? When will the morning come? Full many a mariner tossed about on the sea of life, lashed by its furious storms of adversity, driven helplessly about by the crosscurrents of life, has asked: O Pilot of our Destiny What of the Harbor? Will our wanderings ever end in the port of some smiling land.....When will our task see completion.....When will our hopes see realization.....When will our labors see fulfillment.

I think the saddest thing in life to many a man is the tragedy of unfulfillment. If men could but see the results of their labors, if men could but see the fruition of the planted seeds of their hopes. If men could but stretch their hands thru time and catch the far off interest of tears ---Why then, men would be content to toil patiently and wait in silent expectancy for the glorious moment of fulfillment. Then the feet of the traveler on the road of life would never grow weary, and he, who struggles thru the night, would dream, althwart the night, waiting to greet the morning star, and the mariner would sing in the face of storm, knowing that the peaceful harbor is near at hand.

But how few, how sadly few, are the evidences

of fulfillment about us and how many, how many are the evidences of unfulfillment -- of flowers nipped in the bud, of hopes denied and aspiration thwarted. How many a pilgrim upon the road of life, never reached the shrine of his life's devotion, how many a man toiling upward in the night, has never been greeted by the ray of a breaking dawn. How many a voyage of some poor man, ended in shipwreck in the tomb of the sounding sea. How few are the tasks which we succeed in completing, how fewer still are the realizations of the ideals of life.

And the finer and nobler the man, the greater his task and ideal, the less likely it is of fulfillment. Think of the men, who from time immemorial, have struggled to make life beautiful, to banish poverty, ignorance, vice, to restore the disinherited to their patrimony, and the dispossessed to their rights. The men who made this the holy ideal of their lives. How niggardly has been their realization, how pitifully, dishearteningly small has been the dividend on the precious investment of their life's blood and passion. The great men who suffered and sacrificed, and whose efforts were never crowned with success.

Think of the men who have grown old and broken in the service of humanity, the teachers of religion, and the social servants, who have struggled for years and years to bring about the Kingdom of God upon earth -- peace and justice in the world -- see how utterly fruitless have been their labors, how little, how little they have achieved.

The tragedy of unfulfillment was never brot so poignantly home to the children of men, as during the last few years. All about us the scythe of war is reaping a harvest of young and beautiful lives which never ripened into the fullness of maturity. Men, young men, resplendent in the brilliant promises of life, men, young men, athrill with ~~the~~ aspiration, eager for the glorious adventure of life, with ambitions crowding for the light of realization. Young men whose lives have scarcely unfolded, are suddenly snatched by the horny hand of fate and hurled into the reeking trough of war to be broken, mutilated and - destroyed.

What man is there, that does not feel the ghastly tragedy of unfulfillment in the lives of these young men -- the golden thread cut sharply before it wove itself into some beautiful pattern, the stave of song suddenly silenced, ere it was fully sung.....the tragedy of unfulfillment.

These thots come to thinking men and women, concerning the endlessness of human quest and the unfullment of human life, and sometimes to many men, dishearteningly, especially to the men who think in the tid-bits of reality, who bind their vision by the horizon of immediate realization, who are eager to snatch mouthful from life - to these men the thot comes as a dispiriting fact. Some of them try to extract from this "Sorry scheme of things entire" surcease from it all in the cup of pleasure, the cup that "Clears today of past regrets and future fears" and so they wallow thru

life like dirt-children, finding in a surfeited self, the supreme good of life. Others again, and many of them, drift thru life aimlessly, careless, free, dawdling, trifling, playing.....They are the lotus eaters of humanity - they, who sing "Death is the end of life, Oh why should life all labor be!" And still others are hurled into the depths of despair - they are the pessimists of life who go moping thru life--the cuttle fish of humanity - whose inky excretions defile the white glory of living, and lastly--

There are men who run away from life. They see the futility, the vanity of human striving. They lead no where. They cut themselves loose from the meshes of an entangling existence. The weariness of life cannot be found in action but in contemplation. They seek the communion of the infinite in solitude, in the peaceful quiet of the hermit's life. Now to them comes the challenge of faith, as voiced by a sage of our people:

"Thou gormand of life's pleasures, thou idler on life's highway, Thou man of foolish sorrows, thou aesthetic who dost seek God where God is not." "You who hate life ^{who} of shun life because you cannot see the completion of human tasks, the fulfillment of human ambitions, the full realization of human hopes, know that "Thine is not the duty to complete the task". The work of a man's labor is viewed in the eyes of the master of the workshop, not by its completion, not by its success, but by the honesty and sincerity of the workmanship. "Thine is not the duty to complete the Task"! No ideal worthy of man can be achieved by any one man in any one age, for ideals

worthy of men, are not the ambitions of many men --- Power, Wealth, Position, Pleasure - such ambitions can be achieved by some men some time, but those holy ideals, those ideals which aim to bring a beautiful completion, a holy perfection, those ideals which aim to make our lives after a higher pattern of beauty and perfection, those ideals which aim to give purpose and significance to human life, those ideals must by their very nature remain progressively unattainable. They are constantly and ever ahead of us, but we can never overtake them. They call, they beckon, they entice, but they are always in front of us. These ideals are at the same time a goal and a starting point, a promise and a challenge. These ideals are at the same time as near and as far as the stars, distant as men measure distance, near as men hear their message. "Thine is not the duty to complete the task" - and He, who planned the whole from the beginning, in whose great workshop thou toiledst, He will complete the task which thou didst begin. He will complete the circle of perfection on the arc of thy humble efforts. "Thine is not the duty to complete the task".

Do not therefore seek happiness in the completion of thy task but in the performance of it - not in the arriving but in the travelling - not in the ultimate moment of achievement but in the ever-present moment of striving. As for the goal of life why that is the road -- as for the end of life - the end is the journey.

"Thine is not the duty to complete the task, neither art thou free to desist from it." The transcendent greatness of the task is no ground for renouncing it. No soldier may desert the battle field simply because the battle is tremendously great and ~~xx~~ its outcome uncertain. In the ante room of Purgatory Dante confined the souls which neither Paradise, Purgatory, or the Inferno, would harbor, because they lived without praise or blame, and among these Dante included a pope who thru cowardice made the grand "renunciation" - abdicating his throne simply because he lacked the courage to face the tasks entrusted to him. "Neither art thou free to desist from it".

The Epicurean, the gormand, of life's pleasures, the lotus-eater who loafs on life's highway, the pessimist who cannot work for the cloud before his eyes, and the Aesthetic who shuns life, all of them are moral slackers and weaklings. They surrender, one to his vices, another to his indolence, a third to his sorrows and a fourth to his fears. None of them, none of them feels the touch of the burning fingers of the human spirit, the irresistible, unconquerable spirit of man, before whose mighty onslaught the walls of doubts, sorrows, ^{and} disappointments crumble and fall to the ground.

"Neither are thou free to desist from it".

"Day by day, say the Rabbis, a ministering angel is created from the stream of fire. He sings a paeon ~~xx~~ of glory unto God and then passes away. Be the song brief or long, be it of the fullness of the epic or the passionate brevity of the lyric, what matters it.

Suffice it for man, born of the living fire of God, to sing the song of his life's labor, as it is given him to sing, and then pass away. ~~His~~ His work is then done.

My friend - God rest his soul! - who left the quiet campus of his Alma Mater for the tortured fields of Flanders, and there offered himself, his brilliant future, his cherished hopes, his newly found love and happiness, upon the altars of his God -- and was accepted. He, too, sang his paeon^{of glory} to God - and passed away. His work was done. "Some men gain immortality in a brief hour" say the sages ---- In twenty brief summers he fulfilled his destiny and gained his immortality. He might have lived much longer and achieved much less. "Thine is not the duty to complete the task, neither art thou free to desist from it, and know, that the reward of the righteous is in the days to come". The master of the workshop is faithful and pays a reward for all our labors. No seed of goodness is planted in tears but what some one, in the days to come, will reap in song. No act of greatness is performed by man, but what its influence echoes round the world, touching the souls of men and attuning them to higher resolves.

Thou, dear friend of my heart, in thy nameless grave across the sea, Ye dreamers of dreams, and all ye toilers of the earth, ye burdened travelers upon the road of life, ye servants of men, ye builders of tomorrow, ye pilgrims of the eternal quest "yours is not the duty to complete the task, neither were ye free to desist from it",

know that the reward of the righteous is in the days to come." You die on top of the mountain, overlooking the promised land whither you could not go. You die but you die on top of the mountain. know then that your reward is in the days to come. In the days to come, we, the men of tomorrow, who struggle in the valley, will lift our sweat-dimmed eyes to your nameless grave on top of the mountain, and from your grave, draw inspiration and strength for life, from your life, draw courage for heroic deaths. "Yours is not the duty to complete the task, neither are you free to desist from it, for know that the reward of the righteous is in the days to come---Amen.

