"Who art thou, O great mountain? before Zerubabel thou shalt become a plain." (Zechariah 4:7)

The young prophet Zechariah was a part of a company that returned from exile to restore the city of Jerusalem and to rebuild its temple. These had entered upon their task with great expectations and with hot enthusiasm. But they did not find the task half so easy as they expected. They encountered one mountainous opposition after the other. At last, hope deferred made the heart a bit sick. They decided to build houses for themselves and to let the impossible task of the building of the temple take care of itself.

Now it was to this depressed and discouraged crowd that God sent this young prophet. He came to them as a son of encouragement. His was a great mission. Blessed is the man in any day who is able to put hope into the heartless. Blessed is he who is able to change sobs of despair into songs of expectation. Zechariah did not deny the reality of their difficulties. He was sure, however, that those difficulties might be overcome. "Who art thou, O great mountain? before Zerubabel thou shalt become a plain."

This was a timely word when it was uttered in the long ago. It is just as up-to-date at this moment as when it was first uttered.

This is the case because we of today face difficulties just as mountainous as those faced by the Jews at that distant yesterday.
"Mastering Our Difficulties"

We need this heartening word today because we too are confronted by mountains of difficulty.

1. We have to face difficulties as individuals. This is true of every one of us. The road of life may stretch over level distance for a while but sooner or later it comes up against some kind of mountain where the going becomes so hard as to seem impossible. Many of you realize what I mean because you have been taught by your own experiences. Your mountain may not be like that of your neighbor, but all of us soon or late come face to face with difficulties, with rugged mountains that seem to block our way altogether.

For some it may be a mountain of disappointment, dear dreams that never came true. For others it is a mountain of economic difficulty. Losses have come and wealth has given place to want. For others still it is some handicap that seems to make any gallant climbing impossible. Paul knew this experience. He was hampered by a thorn in the flesh. Just what that thorn was I do not know but Paul was sure that it was as a ball and chain about his ankle that made his going hard. We have our individual difficulties, all of us.

2. Then we have our difficulties as a group. These people in the long ago were undertaking to rebuild their church but mountains of opposition stood in the way. We are undertaking to build here at the center of this city a victorious, life-giving church. By heroic sacrifices you have erected the building. Now it remains to use it for the glory of God. Of all the churches I think a downtown city church is the most necessary. It is to the city what the heart is to the human body. To weaken such a church is to weaken every church. To strengthen such a church is to give to every church added strength.

The downtown church is not only the most essential but it is the most difficult. It is a church without a parish. The whole city must be
its parish. It is a church that is constantly giving members to other churches. It is a church that finds especial difficulty in keeping a growing Sunday School because its members can send their children to suburban churches with much greater ease. Suburban churches can live with one service a Sunday. The downtown church must have two or it cannot live. It must be a constantly growing church with an evangelistic program. Its difficulties have multiplied as modern Christians have become increasingly afraid of night air. We have our difficulties as a church but we must meet and overcome them or both the church and the city will suffer great loss.

3. Then we have our national difficulties. What mountains loom against the sky as we face the future as a nation. Capital is at war with labor, and labor with capital. Each seems bent on getting advantage of the other. The cry of each seems to be 'every fellow for himself and the devil take the hindmost.' But whenever that becomes the attitude of the individual or the group the devil also gets the foremost. Meanwhile the public, the innocent bystander, suffers as well. We have our distressing national difficulties that cannot be settled except in a spirit of good will.

II

Now what do we do about these difficulties? In the larger world field we may feel that there is little we can do but there is certainly something we can do about the difficulties that confront us personally. What are we to do about the mountains that block our path and seem to make any further progress impossible. When we find ourselves thus shut in we react in various ways.

1. Some shut their eyes to their difficulties and refuse to acknowledge that they exist. This is an excellent method provided the mountain that you confront is imaginary. Often that is the case. Physicians tell us that more than half of the patients in our hospitals are suffering from diseases
of the mind rather than the body. The denial of your weakness is certainly a real cure for an imaginary disease.

That being the case such a method is to an imaginary cure for a real disease. Most of the disastrous wrecks that are suffered by commercial planes are caused by the aviator flying his plane into the side of a mountain. The fact that he imagines there is no mountain there does not prevent the crash. The other night when I started for the door in the dark there was no chair to obstruct my way. But that did not save me a barked shin when I ran into it. We cannot get rid of any difficulty by simply ignoring it. A little child stood before me and shut his eyes and said, "You can't see me," but I could see him none the less.

3. There are others that come face to face with difficulties, realize their reality, yet determine to avoid them. When a mountain obstructs their way they seek neither to change it into a plain nor to climb over it. They try to go round it. They are the apostles of the easy way. They are determined to shun conflict at all costs. They put comfort above character, decide to live on Easy Street regardless of the fact that that street always ends in Rotton Row.

There is no surer way to failure than to make comfort our first aim. When Israel became divided as a nation Jeroboam became king of the ten tribes. He realized that while the nation was divided politically it was still one in religion. He feared that this religious oneness would inevitably lead to political oneness unless he did something about it. Therefore he sought to destroy the faith of his people. How did he set about it? By appealing to their love of ease. He did not tell them that their religion had proved futile, that it was false and useless. He merely said: "It is all right but it costs too much. It is too much for you to give up to Jerusalem." Thus taking the easy way the nation rotted down. To make ease the test will mean the same for you and me.
"Who art thou, O great mountain? before Zerubabel thou shalt become a plain." (Zechariah 4:7)

This young prophet had returned with his fellow exiles to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and its ruined temple. They had set out on this enterprise with high hopes. They were undergirded by great expectations. They were sure that under the guidance of God their city and temple were soon to be restored to their old-time splendor. But in this they were doomed to disappointment. They found themselves confronted by stubborn difficulties that seemed to make the realization of their dreams impossible. For this reason many were disappointed and discouraged. Some were embittered and ready to give up the enterprise altogether.

Now it was to this disappointed and disillusioned people that Zechariah was sent. He seems to have been raised up of God to speak a word of encouragement to a group that had become thoroughly discouraged. He was sent to relight the candle of hope and expectancy in lives where the light had gone out. His was therefore a great mission. Of all the benefactors that help us in the business of living few, I think, are so helpful as those who have skill to put heart into the hopeless and to change sobs into songs. This young prophet did not shut his eyes to the difficulties but he faced them in the light of God. Thus facing them he uttered this heartening word: "Who art thou, O great mountain? before Zerubabel thou shalt become a plain."
We need this word today because we, too, are confronted by difficulties.

1. We have our international difficulties. The millions all round the world are eager for abiding peace. They long for a sense of security. Will a good day ever come when men shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks and learn war any more? Everybody longs for such a day. Too few expect it. This is the case because difficulties mountain-high seem to block the road that leads to permanent world peace. Thus we have our international difficulties.

2. Then we have our difficulties as a nation. At this moment capital and labor are wasting millions as they war with each other. In this mad battle for supremacy there is too little indication of any unselfish desire for the common good. Each seems bent on mastering the other without the least regard for those who belong to neither of their groups. In such an affirmation of every fellow for himself and the devil take the hindmost, the devil threatens to get the foremost as well. We are confronted today by grim national problems.

3. Then we have our problems as a church. I am thinking at present of our own local church. You have built here a magnificent plant in the downtown section of our city. It is my conviction that of all churches the most important is the downtown city church. It stands "where cross the crowded ways of life." It stands amidst the city traffic proclaiming by its very presence that man shall not live by bread alone. It is to the city somewhat as the heart is to the human body. If it is strong and vigorous it helps every other church in the city. If it becomes weak and faltering it weakens every other church.

As the downtown city church is of all others the most necessary, even so it is the most difficult. This is the case for many reasons. In the
first place, it is a church without a parish. The whole city must be its parish. Therefore many of its members live in the very shadow of strong suburban churches. If these have children often they go to this nearby church to Sunday-school. By and by they join and take their parents with them. Thus the downtown city church is constantly giving members to suburban churches. Since it is thus constantly giving it must be constantly receiving. This it must do to a greater degree than other churches by capturing from without instead of nurturing from within. The suburban church can often keep alive by the members received from its church school. Such is not generally the case with a downtown city church. This church must be aggressively evangelistic or die.

To conquer as it should it must have more than one victorious Sunday service. The suburban church may live on one service a week, but not the downtown church. It must have not only a morning service but an evening service as well. This has increased its difficulties. Evening services have gone out of style. The modern Christian is, generally speaking, too delicate to face the night air. In spite of these difficulties not a few downtown churches are going from victory to victory, but many are sickly and some have died. We face our difficulties as a church.

Then we have our individual difficulties. Some of you are looking with eyes full of foreboding at the mountains that seem to block your path even now. For some it is an economic difficulty. You are facing a prospect of want where once there was wealth. For others it is some personal loss. The blighting of some hope, the death of some dear dream. For others still it is a domestic tragedy that has hung crepe not upon the door of your home but upon the door of your heart. Then there are others still to whom the mountain is some handicap that you feel to be as a ball and chain about your ankle. For others still it is the seeming impossibility of your being what you long to be or doing what you long to do. We have our individual difficulties.
"Mastering Our Difficulties" Page 4

II

What are we going to do about these difficulties? When our road comes up against some foreboding mountain we do not all react in the same fashion.

1. For instance, some ignore the mountain, shut their eyes to it altogether. This is a very real remedy providing the mountain is not a reality. Often that is the case. Physicians tell us that more than half of the patients that occupy beds in our hospitals are suffering from diseases of the mind rather than of the body. An imaginary pain is just as tormenting as a real pain. The only difference is that generally speaking it is harder to cure. Imaginary difficulties ought to be ignored.

But if ignoring is a real remedy for imaginary evils, it is equally true that such a course is an imaginary remedy for evils that are real. The majority of the accidents that befall our commercial planes come about by the pilots flying into the side of a mountain. This pilot may be quite sure that there is no mountain there, but if he is mistaken the wreck is just as fatal as if he had known of its existence all along. When I started for the door the other night, I was sure that there was no obstruction in my way, but the fact that I was sure did not save me from the barked shin that resulted from my running into a chair. Therefore we cannot master our real mountains by simply shutting our eyes.

2. There is a second group that, coming up against a mountain, refuse either to level it with the ground or to scale it. They seek an easy way round it. They believe that the supreme purpose of life should not be to find character, but comfort. When they stand at the forks of the road they do not ask which turn leads to their desired goal, but which so avoids all mountains as to be easy to travel. These are determined to live on Easy Street even though that street may end in Rotten Row.

But to make ease the test of conduct is surely to make a tragic mess of the business of living. Jeroboam wrecked a whole nation in that fashion.
When he became king of the ten tribes he realized that while the Israelites were divided politically they were still one religiously. He was afraid that if they continued to be one in religion they would soon become one politically. Therefore, he set about the task of dividing them religiously. How did he go about it? He did not tell them that their religion was wrong. He told them that it was too costly, that they could get by at far less expense. This was his word: "It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem."

To demand an easy way out of a hard situation is a sure road to failure.

3. There are others who go bravely forward until their smooth road seems to come to a dead end against some mountain. Then they make an abject surrender. Sometimes these fall in self-pity and wail bitterly: "Why should this happen to me?" But whether in cowardly self-pity or in bitterness they tell themselves that the mountain can never either be made into a plain or scaled. Thus they accept defeat as final and complete.

During my first year in the ministry I was moved from a country circuit to a church in the city. It so happened that the pastor whose place I took was very popular. For this reason the congregation blamed his elder for moving him. They blamed him for going. They blamed me for coming. But since I was the only man on the field all three blames fell on me. At my first appearance in the pulpit two sisters sitting in the front pew gave me one glance and then burst into tears. Even after the wonderful sermon that I preached the atmosphere did not greatly change. Therefore, a few days later one came with the encouraging news that Mr. X was going to quit the church. "Why?" I questioned. "Because you are not big enough to fill the place and he is not going to stand by and have the church fall about his ears," was the candid and kindly answer.

Some six weeks later, after I had heard other words equally encouraging I came into the pulpit one morning, held up a sheaf of paper, and said, "See this? It is paper for the writing of church certificates. I saw something
"Mastering Our Difficulties"

this week," I continued, "that encouraged me greatly. I watched a man buy a bottle of soda pop. When" (according to the custom of some thirty-five years ago) "he knocked the stopper in it began to splutter and boil as if the last drop of it were going to escape. I could hardly keep from shouting at the stranger, 'drink it, man, drink it! You will lose it all.' But the wreckless spendthrift waited until it had lapsed into silence. Then I looked and could hardly credit what I saw. For, believe it or not, the bottle seemed as full as it was at the beginning. Nothing had escaped but a few bubbles." So I said, "You who have been bubbling, come and get your letters." Nobody came. Yet there are always those who fall in abject surrender before a real difficulty.

4. Then there is a fourth group who neither shut their eyes, nor demand an easy way, nor surrender. They defy their mountains and either level them with the plains or climb over them. This was a possibility ahead of the discouraged people to whom Zechariah spoke. It is a possibility ahead for you and me. This is a word for everyone of us. Who art thou, O mountain? before me thou shalt become a plain.

III

How shall we thus master our mountains?

1. In winning such a victory it would help us to realize that the mountains we face are not altogether unique. Perhaps you feel that nobody was ever confronted with such ugly difficulties as yourself. But difficulties are incidental to the business of living. Life, if it is of any worth at all, is a conflict. This is especially true of the Christian life. If you have made up your mind to be a follower of Jesus Christ you better make up your mind to fight and to fight gallantly. Jesus was eager for followers, but he never once appealed to any man's loyalty on the basis that that loyalty would cost him nothing! Jesus knew that to follow him was surely to get into trouble.
For instance when one came asking: "Are there few that be saved?" Jesus did not give the desired answer. He did not say whether there would be many or few. Instead he said: "Strive to enter in at the straight gate." Strive—that is a word wet with sweat and flecked with blood. It is a muscular, battling word. It means fight to enter in, agonize somewhat as Jesus agonized in Gethsemane to enter in. If you are finding life a fight, therefore it is nothing more than what is to be expected. If you are escaping all conflict you better look well to your guideposts for the chances are that you are on the wrong road.

2. It will help also to remember that the mountainous difficulties that confront us are one big reason for our being here. I put some work and much hope into a certain meeting years ago. I invited an able man whom I held in peculiar honor to be the speaker. I expected hundreds if not thousands to come to hear his one address, but a mere handful came. The failure depressed me while it made me indignant. I apologized to the great man whom I had invited. Whined a bit, perhaps. Anyway he gave this fine answer: "My son, if everybody were just as interested in the good as they ought to be the Lord would not need you and me. Because they are not, that is the reason we are here."

Do you find yourself up against difficulties that loom so large that they seem stark impossibilities? That means that yours is a place of peculiar honor. You have come to the kingdom for such a time as this. Therefore instead of whining, instead of pitying yourself, instead of telling yourself that nothing can be done about it, rather thank God that he can trust you enough to match you against these mighty mountains. For believe me, these forbidding mountains are one big reason for your being where you are.

3. It will help us further to bear in mind that there is no difficulty, no obstructing mountain that can wreck our final defeat. Instead we can make every single opposition minister to our enrichment. Paul had found
this true so many times that he had reached a definite conclusion. "We know," he declares, "that all things work together for good to them that love God." This is true of the road that stretches away in level distances. It is equally true of the road that winds over rugged mountains. In fact, when we look about us for those who have lived most richly we find that they are not sheltered souls for whom life has been easy. They are rather those whose road has been blocked in by one forbidding mountain after another. Every difficulty, therefore, however great, may add to our enrichment.

4. Finally, if we change our mountains into plains or if we are to scale them as if they were level ground, we must approach them undergirded by a vital faith in God. He alone is our adequacy for meeting life's impossibilities. Jesus perhaps had this word of the Prophet in mind when He declared that every one whose faith is real can toss mountains about as a juggler tosses his ball.

It is through faith in God that we achieve the impossible within ourselves. Our Lord is constantly calling us to what in our own strength we cannot accomplish. One day he looked into the face of a man who had been flat of his back for thirty-eight years. He commanded this man to do the impossible. "Rise, take up thy bed, and walk." But as he willed what Jesus willed for him, as he believed that he could do what was commanded, the impossible became possible and he rose and walked. To be new creations in Christ Jesus, to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, these are big impossibilities that become possible only through faith in God.

Not only do we become the impossible through faith, but we also accomplish the impossible. The writer to the Hebrews calls attention to the fact that while the Egyptians and Hebrews went down the same road, encountered the same impassible barrier, the Red Sea, one found this barrier a terminus, the other found it a thoroughfare. One found it a way of death and the other found it a way of life. Why the difference? It was not that
this heard of Hebrew slaves was superior to the Egyptians. The difference was that the Hebrews had faith in God while the others did not.

Had a friend pointed out that little handful of disciples who years ago went into the upper room where they experienced Pentecost and had said to me: "These are going to remake the world. They are going to spread over this Roman Empire like a life-giving springtime. In their presence the flowers are going to bloom and millions are going to be made conscious of God. By them the whole world is going to be changed." Had anyone spoken after that fashion, I should have said, "Impossible." In so saying I would have been entirely right. Yet it happened none the less. The same may be true for us. Therefore, I may dare to shout in the presence of the difficulties that confront one: "Who art thou, O great mountain? before me as I approach you in the fellowship of God, thou shalt become a plain."