

Blessed Be Our Inadequacies

by Desmond Ford



Have you ever noticed that we are sometimes encouraged by the revelation of deficiencies in others? It is not the nicest characteristic of our natures, to be sure, but it must be confessed as a reality.

The Case of J. Robert Oppenheimer

For example, I was interested to read recently in a biography of J. Robert Oppenheimer (often called "the father of the atomic bomb") that though a brilliant student in the laboratory in his early years, he was found to be clumsy. He "not only fumbled and broke things; he could not make the simplest experiment work, when by all natural laws it should have."¹

He was in some respects the most brilliant lecturer the University of California at Berkeley had ever known. But even there, as with all men, great or small, he had his defects. It was his irritating habit to answer questions before they had been fully stated. (As one who has shared this vice I am aware how disturbing it can be to certain students.) Like Alan Bloom, author of *The Closing of the American Mind*, Oppenheimer was in the habit of smoking while he lectured. This no doubt paved the way for his death at sixty-three of cancer of the larynx.

[Today we would not be as tolerant of chain-smoking lecturers as people were in the sixties. If, for example, we are asked by a fellow passenger on a plane if we mind if he smokes, we are tempted to reply, "Not if you mind stepping outside to do it!"]

The Case of C.S. Lewis

Let it not be thought that Christians are without any Achilles' heel. In W. H. Lewis' compilation, *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, we have these words from this century's foremost Christian apologist:

I think I know my own limitations and am quite sure that an academic or literary career is the only one in which I can hope ever to go beyond the meanest mediocrity. The Bar is a gamble ... and in business, of course, I should be bankrupt or in jail very soon²

Spiritual Gifts

Do not Christians have spiritual gifts? Yes. But they are gifts. They are the intensification and enlivening of natural faculties bestowed at conception, necessary precisely because we are all saddled with deficiencies which, unless compensated for, would negate our usefulness.

Admission of our mutual inadequacies should not be accompanied by resignation as regards our defects. As certainly as we can all be better morally and spiritually than we are, so with all our other tendencies. An old doggerel says:

Good, better, best;
Never let it rest,
'Til the good is better,
And the better best.

The Case of William Nolen

This should be ever the intent of every conscientious person. I was interested recently in reading a medical best seller called *A Surgeon's World*, by William A. Nolen, M.D. This writer-surgeon was not from the beginning skillful at his chosen profession. I quote:

There were times, however, when I wondered if I had what it took to make a surgeon. As early as my freshman year, in anatomy class, I discovered that I wasn't as handy with a scalpel as were some of my classmates. Four of us worked together on one cadaver, and when it was my turn to dissect I was lucky if I could find and peel out the muscles, nerves and blood vessels for which we were looking. Often I'd cut the structure in half before I saw it. Specifically I remember making a shambles of our cadaver's left wrist while one of my co-workers neatly laid out the tendons, nerves, and vessels of the right. In my senior year, after delivering a baby, I had a horrible time sewing up the cut or tear that resulted from the delivery. I just couldn't seem to get the proper grip on the holder that held the needle and I dropped a lot of instruments on the floor.

In the operating room, during two months of surgery in my senior year, the intern would occasionally let me help him sew up the skin. If the incision required twenty stitches, he'd have eighteen in before I'd managed to tie two knots. I was really very clumsy. I didn't know, at that time, that clumsiness was something I could and would overcome with experience.³

The Case of Bertrand Russell

A classic autobiography such as that of Lord Bertrand Russell faithfully chronicles the admitted defects of the writer (and of those of his best friends). If I remember rightly, it is Russell who pointed out that the great scientist Alfred Whitehead was absolutely hopeless in all financial affairs.

I almost suspect that if I had been there I would have heard God whispering to the angels of heaven, as his providence permitted a new meteor to burst upon the world, "This one will be so bright, we'll have to make sure there are some strongly negative elements in the candlestick. We do not want this scintillating figure to be too easily destroyed by unwanted pride."

The Case of Samuel Johnson

The defects with which we are all saddled include physical ones as well as temperamental liabilities and operational deficiencies. An excellent illustration is that of the famed Dr. Samuel Johnson, a committed Christian. He was born on September 18th, 1709, after a prolonged and difficult labor. The child was silent and

sickly and very early contracted scrofula—tuberculosis of the lymph glands—and also lost part of his eyesight. He was described by another as "a poor, diseased infant gone almost blind." Samuel Johnson himself gave that report in his fifties, reporting what older people had told him.

The child had plenty of pertinacity and refused to let his limited eyesight hinder him more than was absolutely necessary. Usually he was accompanied to his school by a servant lest he should meet with some accident through his nearsightedness. One day the servant did not appear and Sam set off on his own. Down the center of the street was a channel, as in the Middle Ages, full of loathsome liquid. As Sam approached that obstacle, he got down on his hands and knees to be certain of seeing it and to guess at its width for negotiating it. Dame Oliver, the school teacher, observed him. When he chanced to see her, he flew into a rage, punching her with all his strength because she had insulted his independence.

John Wain wrote an excellent biography of Dr. Johnson, and in it he said:

Samuel's mind was not only powerful and original: he had a highly idiosyncratic way of working. Long periods of sluggish idleness would be broken by flashes of concentration almost terrifying in its singleness. He seems never to have been, as most of us are most of the time, more or less attentive, more or less alert. Either he was lost in day-dreaming and vacuity, or he was focussing on what was in front of him with a fierce glare of attention. In this, undoubtedly, there is an element of the neurotic. During his fits of inertia, Sam literally could not concentrate. He would look up at the town clock, and though his eyesight was good enough to see the position of its hands, he was unable to register what time it showed. He could not force the information into his mind.⁴

On a later page, Wain tells us:

Samuel Johnson learned to fear the hours of stagnant idleness forced on him by the pendulum swings of his mind. In these vacant hours undisciplined thoughts took over. But the period of heaviness, when he was too sunk in his strange sloth to perform such simple acts of cognition as telling the time, must have been a source of perplexity and worry.⁵

Though Johnson was large and strong physically, his health of both mind and body was under continual attack. He wrote to an old friend, "My health has been, from my twentieth year, such as has seldom afforded me a single day of ease." At another time, he said that he "knew not what it was to be totally free from pain."

Johnson's childhood attack of scrofula had left him blind in one eye and myopic in the other; he had scars from an early bout of smallpox. Other than this, his physical disability seemed to be purely nervous in origin. He moved clumsily; when he walked along, he seemed to be putting his whole body into the effort, as

much swimming as walking; in later years his limbs frequently shook as with a palsy, but even in his prime he was subject to more or less continual twitches and convulsive starts. It has been conjectured by some medical men that he was a mild form of spastic.

In addition, his inattentions expressed themselves in a number of compulsive habits. Going along a street in which there were posts, he would carefully lay his hand on each one as he passed, and if inadvertently he missed one, he would go back a considerable distance in order to touch it. Also, as Boswell noticed, he made a ritual of entering a door or passage in such a way as to take a certain number of steps to reach a certain point.⁶

In later years, looking back, Johnson wrote in his diary, "When I survey my past life, I discover nothing but a barren waste of time with some disorders of body, and disservices of the mind very near to madness." Yet this is the man who produced an enormous volume of work, including the famous dictionary. He produced a definitive edition of Shakespeare containing not only the text and Johnson's own notes but comments from the previous editions of various scholars. It is thought by some that Johnson came close to knowing the entire text of Shakespeare by heart. But this we also know—the year after his Shakespeare was published, illness overwhelmed him. It was in the nature of a nervous collapse. He lay in his bed for weeks upon end with gloomy forebodings gnawing incessantly at his heart. Yet this man was to live on into his mid-seventies, despite his keeping company mostly with the dead as do all the aged.

Wain comments, "As he sat by his fire, it was ghosts who commonly sat with him." To an old friend he wrote:

I struggle hard for life. I take physic and take air. My friend's chariot is always ready. We've run this morning twenty-four miles, and could run forty-eight more. But who can run the race with the dead?

Toward the end he made the resolution, "I will take no more physic, not even my opiates; for I have prayed that I may render up my soul to God unclouded." In the early part of that month in which he died, he wrote his last prayer of which we give a portion:

Almighty and most merciful Father, I am now, as to human eyes it seems, about to commemorate for the last time, the death of Thy Son Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Redeemer. Grant, O Lord, that my whole hope and confidence may be in His merits and in Thy mercy Have mercy upon me and pardon the multitude of my offences. Bless my friends, have mercy upon all men. Support me by the grace of Thy Holy Spirit in the days of weakness and at the hour of death, and receive me, at my death to everlasting happiness, for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Who can review such a life without realizing God's benevolent purposes in permitting us to inherit physical and mental defects? One purpose is that God might cre-

ate in us a sense of need for his grace and help and mercy; a sense of need that God's grace and help and mercy might never leave us; a sense of need that might act as a good angel and lead us into the palace of salvation and life eternal.

The Bible—the Greatest Biography

Until this century most biographies were really hagiographies as they failed to follow the injunction of Oliver Cromwell to Lely, the artist, "Paint me just as I am—warts and all!" But it is almost impossible to read a modern day biography of any great man or woman without seeing the warts depicted, and often even exaggerated.

In the greatest Book of all, the deficiencies, defects, and mistakes of God's saints are faithfully represented. Indeed, what we seem to remember most about some Bible characters is not their successes but their failures. We think more often about Peter's denial of Christ than of his exalting of the Lord at Pentecost. We think more often of David's adultery than we do of his victory over Goliath. That is not without some advantage, for it is good that he who "thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor 10:12, KJV).

No Man Is an Island

But the main point, perhaps, is this. No man is an island. We do not need John Donne to assure us of that truth. Every day demonstrates it. I cannot be my own dentist, my own surgeon, my own financial expert, or even my own plumber and electrician. Most of us can't. We need each other. Our defects clamor for the assistance that brothers and sisters in Christ can gladly provide. We need each other, and no life is right that is not dedicated to ministry of others' needs. Paul made it clear in 1 Corinthians 1:12 that no one has all the gifts. That, too, is a mercy. We would be intolerable people to know if we were multigifted without compensating humility. God has done all things well, even in what he has withheld as well as what he has given.

Our greatest inadequacy, of course, is one neither blameless nor trifling—we are bereft of righteousness. And it is God's great glory to supply our lack. The moment we sense our poverty or plead for the infinite riches of the imputed righteousness of Christ, it is done! (1 Cor 1:30; Rom 3:19-27; 5:12-19). Alleluia! ❖

Footnotes

1. Denise Royal, *The Story of J. Robert Oppenheimer*, page 30.
2. W.H. Lewis, *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, p. 82.
3. William A. Nolen, M.D., *A Surgeon's World*, pp. 25-26.
4. John Wain, *Dr. Johnson*, page 25.
5. *Ibid.*, page 27.
6. *Ibid.*, page 253.
7. *Ibid.*, page 370.