

When Bad Things Happen To Good People

Part 2

September 27, 2006

Robert Schuler says: *Tough times don't last—tough people do.* I think I understand what he's getting at—and I agree with him in principle. But I know a lot of people that would like to sit down with him and explain just how wrong he is about the first part; because tough times, though they won't last for all time, do, at times, last for a very long time. Just ask anyone with a chronic disease or illness; ask a dad or mom that's buried their child, or the lonely husband or wife whose mate decided to have an affair or end the marriage; ask the guy that can't get ahead no matter how hard he tries; forget getting ahead, he can't even keep up—if it's not medical bills it's a transmission for a car that's been out of warranty for a long time; if it's not a bad transmission it's a leak in the roof or a broken water line or a dead compressor in the refrigerator or air-conditioner... Sometimes tough times do last...

James 1:2-8

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. ⁴Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. ⁵If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. ⁶But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.

Two Biblical Principles You Need To Remember

Tough Times Are Inevitable And Unavoidable

The word is “when” not “if” (verse 2). That isn't news to most of you—you've heard it before most likely, because it's illusive enough to allow Bible teachers to sound like we've found something that most others will miss, but obvious enough that we really don't have to dig too deep to find. As a result it's made its way into most of our play books.

Never-the-less, we shouldn't take it lightly—ever—because it's absolutely true. Mark it down, and never forget this; don't be surprised *when*, not *if*, your life is interrupted, halted, twisted, turned, mangled, afflicted or tormented by any number of unforeseen obstacles, unwarranted challenges, undesirable requirements, unimagined adjustments, unavoidable suffering or unceasing pain...because you *will* face them.

They may come to you in the form of a sleepless night or two brought on by the emotional pain of a relationship gone bad. They may come to you in the form of sleeplessness without end that's brought on by the pure physical pain of a ravaging disease... You never know, and you can't avoid it—that's the lesson.

ILLUSTRATION

A man was traveling home from work on the subway. He was sick already, and to make things worse, he was crammed in the subway like a sardine, positioned right behind the automatic door. The further they traveled, bouncing and swaying, the sicker and more nauseated he got. When the subway made its scheduled stop, the door opened automatically, and out came this guy's lunch all over another fellow who was getting ready to board, the doors slammed shut, and the subway took off leaving this man with someone else's lunch all over him. All he could say was: "Why me?"

Here's the lesson—if it didn't get you this time, it will the next time. Either you've known some of those times or you will know them. You cannot even hope to escape them—mark it down. You're number will be called...

Tough Times Have Redemptive Potential

God can use *tragedy* as easily as he can use *triumphs*, and apparently more effectively, to accomplish his ultimate purpose in our lives. Verses 3 & 4 give us a hint as to what his purpose is...

- God uses these unwanted experiences that we face to paint us into a corner where he can get our undivided attention...
- When he has our undivided attention, he begins a process designed to *authenticate our faith* (v. 3), which he wants very badly for us to learn, and which we want very badly not to have to learn.
- The learning curve requires that we develop two personality traits:
 - **Perseverance** (v. 3, endurance; staying power).
 - **Maturity** (v.4, a deep, abiding character).

As we learn the enduring quality of an authentic faith, we begin to experience the development of a stability that would never be there otherwise. God's promise to us is that he won't leave anything out—that's his part in this plan. Ours is to be patient during the process—which isn't easy.

Please consider this carefully—these multi-faceted trials, which we all encounter in varying degree, because of God's promise to use them for a good purpose and his ability to do so, don't have to be wasted experiences—they have redemptive potential.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How would you define *redemptive potential*? _____

2. Would you agree or disagree that life's most challenging experiences possess redemptive potential? Strongly agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree
3. Have you ever faced an unwanted situation, circumstance, illness, etc., that you would never have chosen to face, but now believe, or are willing to believe, can be a part of God's plan to authenticate your faith? Yes No

Five Life-Changing Observations

1) Something to Think About

James 1:2

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds.

Consider what pure joy? The trials? I don't think so. I think he's guiding us in a more realistic direction than that. I don't think God expects me to be joyful over bad news—that's not it at all. It's my belief that's he's telling us to look at the big picture, and in spite of the things that challenge us we can well afford to keep a good attitude, because that's what's going to determine how well we make it through.

Like challenges? Here's one for you—check your attitude when the heat's on—if you're joyless—it's time for an attitude adjustment.

Think about this—we don't always have a choice regarding what happens to us—but we always have the choice about how we react to what happens to us—always.

- The easy reaction is, “why me, why this, why now, why not him, why not her?”
- That's God's cue to keep the heat on...our attitude hasn't adjusted yet...
- Who inspires you?
 - The person that loses their job and falls to pieces or the person that loses their job and gets creative and energetic enough to land another one?
 - The person that gets bad news from the doctor and drowns in self-pity or the person that gets bad news, takes it by the throat, thrusts it before God and says, *I'll whip it or die trying?*

QUOTE

I have come to believe that 10% of life is determined by what happens to us; 90% of life is determined by how we react to it. (Chuck Swindoll)

2) Something to Count On

James 1:3

You know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.

For the believer that's willing to face life with the right kind of attitude, test time is a good thing. If we aren't convinced of this, we'll probably waste a lot of time and energy fighting with God about it:

- While we're focused on trying to get him to make it go away...
- He's focused on turning us into people that know how to persevere...

ILLUSTRATION

Joseph said to his brothers: "*You meant it for bad, but God meant it for good*" (Genesis 50:20).

Since God meant it for good, and since it turned out good, and since God, not his brothers, was the one who was ultimately in control of all that happened, we can believe that the tests that we face are meant to develop us, not to destroy us.

3) Something to Believe In

James 1:4

Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

- There's a catch to God's tests.
 - You can't finish it without passing.
 - You can't just accept failure and walk away.
 - God says, *You'll finish, and you'll pass, or you'll stay right where you are.*

1 Peter 5:6

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time.

Here's the picture. God's *mighty hand* has us in its grip... *You mean like the song, he's got the whole world in his hands?* ...no. That's true, but that's not what this is talking about.

It's more like holding onto your six-year-old at Six Flags... You've got both hands on their shoulders, even though they don't like it, making sure they don't get lost and that they go where you know it's safe for them to go...which they don't always like either...because they think they can do anything...

A hand can hold. But it can do more. It can caress. It can embrace. But it can also grip! It can squeeze! It can pinch! That's the idea here.

Your life and mine are in God's hands. What goes on with our lives is explained by what those mighty hands do with us. Sometimes we move in the wrong direction. When we do, he tightens his grip to get our attention: to teach us patience. At other times he squeezes us, he pinches us, and it's all designed to accomplish something good in our lives.

- The best thing we can do is *humble ourselves* to the pressure of his mighty hand. We can learn it now or learn it later, but we're going to learn it.
- *But that's not fair!*
 - But that's not the end!
 - We don't have to take it sitting down...

1 Peter 5:7

Casting all your care upon him; for he cares for you.

When we're to the point that we want to **scream**, God says, *I'm ready to listen. Cast all your anxieties to me. Why? Because I do care. It's just you and me—let 'er rip.*

He squeezes. He pinches. But he tells us it's all right to object. In fact he wants us to respond, he tells us to respond—to him. He wants us to respond to him with honesty and openness. Isn't that a relief?

4) Something to Ask For

James 1:5-6

If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. ⁶ But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.

- **Wisdom** gives us God's insight.
- **Believing** gives us God's strength to endure the test.

Without *wisdom* and *faith* the troubles we face will beat us down every time. So how do we get 'em? We ask for them. That's all. We don't have to earn our stripes. Just ask...

5) Something to Run From

James 1:7-8

That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.

Once you know what it is, run from it for all your worth. *Double minded* describes a life teetering between wanting his or her way and wanting God's way too. You can't have both!

To try is to be *double-minded*, and *double-minded people* can't be trusted with God's blessings, so they get nothing from him (v. 7).

ILLUSTRATION

It's probably not anything you've ever thought you needed to know...but, how would you go about catching a monkey?

I know how. I saw it on *The Discovery Channel*.

The hunter tied a gourd to a tree, and cut a small hole in it, just large enough for a monkey to squeeze its cute little hand through. Then they filled it up with rice and left. The monkey would come along in time, smell the rice, reach his greedy little hand inside to get the rice, and clinch his triumphant fist tightly around his precious prize. And that would be his downfall. While his hand would fit through the hole easily enough, his fist would not. There he sat, screaming, jumping and defiant. And there it would remain until its captor, at his leisure, would come and get him.

He couldn't get loose because he wouldn't turn loose. That's the picture of a "double minded" Christian.

Down inside the gourd is my will. That's the rice. On the outside is freedom and liberty. I want the freedom of living life with wisdom and faith—but I want the rice too...so to speak. God is teaching us that we can't have both.

- We need wisdom to teach us which one we should really want—that's what lets me know I'm better off without the rice.
- And we need faith—that supplies me with strength to know I don't need that rice to have a fulfilled life.
 - We've always thought without *it*, whatever *it* is, we couldn't possibly have a joyful life.
 - But the exact opposite is true.

QUOTE

All of us are facing a series of great opportunities, brilliantly disguised as impossible, or unsolvable problems. (Charles Swindoll).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you accept or reject the notion that you and you alone are in charge of whether or not you enjoy life? Accept Reject
2. When serious trouble strikes what is your default setting?
 - a. Anger (accusing God of being unfair)
 - b. Double-mindedness (wanting his will and your way)
 - c. Humility (faithfully serving him in spite of it)
3. Has staying angry at God ever served your best interest? Yes No
4. What do you think your reaction would be if you face a serious situation today?

Conclusion

The greatest suffering ever endured; endured with a Godly attitude, with patience, stability, and that left nothing out of God's plan as a result, was when, in eternity past, but revealed in time:

Isaiah 53:10a

It pleased the Lord to bruise him; he put him to grief...(to) make his soul an offering for sin...

Hebrews 5:8

Though he were a Son, yet he learned obedience through the things which he suffered.

It pleased God to bruise him. Staggering. That Jesus learned obedience through suffering is incomprehensible to me.

For some of us, our struggles result from the bruise of conviction. The Holy Spirit is drawing you to the Savior, but you're kicking and screaming in rebellion, just like that little monkey with his hand in the gourd. You have never surrendered your life to God. You have never accepted Christ as your Savior. You ought to.

For others among us, you feel the pain of conviction because as Christians you are in fact a living picture of the double minded Christian. Think about the little monkey again. You want the grip, the squeeze, and the pinch to go away; you want free from it, but you haven't been willing to let go of the rice. It won't work that way. Turn loose...and trust God...maybe for the first time in a very long time, with the affairs of your own life. Just raise the white flag and just give up. You ought to. You're not going to win. God loves you too much and he's got a great plan.