

Adversity –An Unwelcome Servant

“In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith –being more precious than gold, though perishable, is tested by fire –may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Peter 1:6 & 7).



The greatest paradox of Christianity is that, we least like things which do us the most good. Mark Twain once said, “By trying, we can easily learn to endure adversity –another man’s, I mean.”

Different people must contend with different trials; however, adversity in some shape or other comes to every one of us. Though I have not had your trials, we have it in common that we have both had plenty of trials. Furthermore, it is a certitude of the Christian faith that the way I carry my cross will affect the way you carry your’s.

Yet, so many good things come only by adversity. The best friends come out of adversity. “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born to share adversity” (Proverbs 17:17). Adversity is often the only diet that can reduce a fat head.

Another thing learned from adversity is that a pair of pants isn’t the only thing you can patch. We learn things from prosperity; but, we learn many more from adversity. Robert Leighton said, “Adversity is the diamond dust Heaven uses to polish its jewels.”

From time to time, we meet someone whose “ship has actually come in;” if you get them to tell you how it happened, in 99 cases out of 100, you will discover that it was a “hardship” that brought the ship in.

“In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials.” In the King James Version of the Bible we have it, “greatly rejoice.” How can that be done? The Christians, to whom Peter wrote, suffered great trial –I think, greater than any of us may know about. Certainly, we have all had adversity: sickness, losses, bereavement, tragedy, old age, deaths, and maybe some ridicule. These Christians had all the adversities that we have, plus intense and relentless persecution from both the Jews and from the Roman government. The Apostolic period of church history was followed by nearly 300 years of awful persecution. If you were a Jew in those days, to become a Christian meant to be cut off from your family –complete with

a funeral, marking your death. It is a lot like that for an Amish child, or a Greek Orthodox child leaving their community. I went to college with a Greek Orthodox; when he left that community to minister and serve to the wider Christian world, his family held a funeral for him. For these people it was to be cut off from father, mother, sister, brother, community, inheritance –everything you once knew.

But there was more; to follow Christ could also mean that the Roman government might imprison, torture, or execute you. For the heathen, to leave their gods and follow Christ was an equally serious thing.

It was to encourage them under these conditions that Peter wrote this letter. Everything written to this point in the letter is for this purpose. I believe Peter did understand, and I don't think that he overstated his case. After all, he was, himself, crucified upside down because he did not think he was worthy to be crucified in the same manner as our Lord.

To help get them through adversity, he reminded them of their salvation, and of their eternal inheritance. It often seems that Christians do not look forward to heaven unless earth becomes hell. To know that things will get better is always a help in adversity. I once told the story of a friend in our Washington State church who said, "You know pastor, things are going so well for me, I hope the Lord doesn't come and ruin it all." When we visited her 25 years later, she told me that as far as she was concerned, "the Lord could come any time." And I think that she was much happier. By then, she was certainly a kind and gentle person, at peace with all, and with a great deal of understanding of folk who really didn't have it all that good. A new car or dinning room set can only go so far.

Our salvation and eternal inheritance –they are things meant to make us content in adversity. Many of the early saints "took joyfully the spoiling of their goods" (Hebrews 10:34). Many of these early Christians went to their death with a hymn on their lips. We are told that Paul and Silas, with bleeding backs, feet in stocks, in a Roman prison, "sang hymns and praises to God," as mid-night marked the beginning of a new day. No wonder God shook the prison with an earthquake. No wonder the jailer decided to become a Christian that night. It is a striking contrast, that very often those with small adversity can grumble, complain, and grouch, while those with great trials often take them with faith.

Our affliction actually ends up working for us; to the end that Christ is honored (1 Peter 1:7), our faith is strengthened, and our souls are saved (1 Peter 1:9). The faith of his people is important to God. Nothing pleases God more than people who trust him when things are tough. The Bible does say, "Without faith it is impossible to please God" (Hebrews 11:6). Our verse says that it is "much more precious than gold that perishes." Faith is strengthened and purified in

adversity.

There is a passage in the Old Testament that talks about those who pass through these hot, dry, empty, desert valleys in life. “Blessed is the man whose strength is in thee; in whose heart are the ways of them, who passing through the valley of Baca make it a well; the rain also fills the pools. They go from strength to strength” (Psalm 84:5-7). Literally, the phrase means “the valley of weeping.” It is said that the balsam trees in that valley exude tears of gum. The picture is one of sorrow turning to joy. Our verse encourages us to accomplish that by digging wells whenever life brings us to a desert. In that way, we will become a refreshing oasis to others, who will later pass through the same valley.

The idea is that adversity is meant to make us better, rather than bitter. After crossing that valley, we can leave a well, rather than a warning. In this way, we share the cross, as the healing love of Christ carries us safely through each wilderness of life. Because of the sharing, the love, and the helping, even sorrow becomes a joy. Without the love, without the sharing, without the helping, without the “well-digging” it’s just another desert. It is a strange thing that adversity is not nearly so awful when we have a companion. With Christ, we always have a companion in suffering.

United States poet and editor William Cullen Bryant, wrote, “Difficulty, my brethren is the nurse of greatness –a harsh nurse, who roughly rocks her foster-children into strength and athletic proportion.” We all want our children to succeed –whatever that means. Yet, I have a pride that whelms up to tears whenever I see our children or grandchildren struggling against adversity. It is the greatest and most glorious sight in all the world. Wow! Can you believe that is our kid? I have the same sort of feelings whenever I see our Christian friends facing adversity with courage and faith; there is no finer demonstration in all the world. It is something better than “gold that perishes.”

Christianity was born of a love that proved stronger than any adversity the world had to hand out. Even in adversity, Peter noted that, “you rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory” (1 Peter 1: 8 & 9). “We love him, because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). “But God commended his love toward us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). I believe that same love is born again and again in the hearts of Christians. With that love, they are able to do wonderful things with adversity.

It is a strange faith that sings its way through adversity. Never-the-less, it is the story of Christianity. Adversity is combined with “joy unspeakable.” Other religions have no hymn books, with the exception of Judaism –and their songs are more like funeral marches. Often in a minor key.

When adversity comes to the Christian, it becomes a cause for singing. “*We are climbing Jacob’s Ladder.*” The song of the American slave; their faith in Christ was a ladder out of the harshness of

slavery. In the late night hours, with a song of faith, they could turn hell into heaven. The master could own their body; but, not their hope, faith, or mind. In the late night hours, relentless field-work done, the scorching heat of the sun had let up, with a song of faith they could turn hell into heaven. *"O happy day the fixed my choice on Thee my Savior and my God."* There is a song for every trial.

It is a wonder that the Christian can be happy with tears streaming down his or her face. Thomas a' Kempis wrote, "For a man to rejoice in adversity is not grievous to him who loves; for so to joy is the joy of the cross of Christ." Again, we have a song for that *"In the cross of Christ I glory, towering over the wrecks of time; all the light of sacred story gathers round its head sublime."*

What is it that we accomplish in life? I believe that the value of all of life (all of our life) is determined by what God thinks of it and nothing else. Christ is watching us in our adversity, and what does he see? That it "might be found unto the praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:7). It is a well known fact, that in human terms, the greatest thing a person can accomplish is the approval of his or her parents. Children are often emotionally crippled, trying hopelessly to get a word of approval from Dad or Mom.

While it may turn out to be impossible to get the approval of your parents, it is always possible to get the approval of God. He can see you faithfully struggling in adversity. He looks down, and he says, "Will you look at that; what a wonderful kid! See what faith and love can do?" That is what we work for as Christians. That is our success. God is not going to be collecting financial statements at the door to Heaven. There is only one thing we can take from this life, only one thing that determines it a success or not, "Well done, you good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things; enter into the joy of your Lord" (Matthew 25:21).

It is only "required in stewards that a man be found faithful" (1 Corinthians 4). One requirement. He praises the faithful –not necessarily the successful. The greatest honor anyone can ever have out of life is to be a glory to God. "If children, then heirs; heirs of God, joint heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together" (Romans 8:17). There are no better friends than those who have suffered together. There is no experience as great or as lofty. It is the basis for a very deep love.

It is adversity that breaks down prideful walls –walls that keep people apart from God and from each other. British novelist, Virginia Woolf, said, "One likes people much better when they're battered down by a prodigious siege of misfortune than when they triumph." Adversity –an unwelcome servant –never-the-less, a servant. A noble and a humble servant.