

COPING WITH ADVERSITY

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I have been thinking so much about adversity and difficult times or challenging times. It's strange that in this particular time of challenge, the challenge is for everybody across the world. It's not like nobody is going through a difficult time. It seems like it's universal. Adversity seems to be staring at everybody, of course in different ways. Yet, all of us have the need to face this adversity in the way that would be right for us.

Thinking about adversity, I thought about Job. Job is one of those books that you read and come away thinking: Wow! This is huge! Plenty of chapters about somebody who is suffering, and how God puts him on the spot and challenges Satan. When He asks Satan, "Have you seen my servant Job?" Satan scoffs at God and says, "Of course, he will follow You. You have blessed him abundantly."

God takes up the challenge and says, "No, Job will not just worship me because I have blessed him. But Job will worship me because of who I am." And Satan says, "If you take away all this from him, he will leave You." And God allows that to happen. And we read how he loses his family, his possessions. He loses his herds. He even loses his health. And he is sitting by himself, completely covered with boils and sores, and his wife also tells him, "Job, just curse God and die." And Job's response to that is amazing. He says, "Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked I will go. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

Amazing – to have that kind of faith in the midst of this kind of adversity. Elsewhere, he says something that is so true, but gives us an idea as to why he can go through this situation keeping his faith in the Lord intact. He says, "I know that my Redeemer lives." My redeemer means that I have been redeemed by somebody. And if I am being redeemed by somebody, then the onus is on that person, my Redeemer, to make sure that He takes me through this period in my life. and because He lives, I can face tomorrow. I know that my Redeemer lives. What about you today, beloved? How are you going through your situations and circumstances? How are you going through the lockdown? How are you going through isolation or social distancing? How are you managing with all of these restrictions? Has it stolen your joy? Has peace vanished from you? Are you beginning to get distraught? Are you beginning to lose it?

I put together three possible scenarios that we could be in, and I want us to just go through it one by one. I want you to see whether you fall into any of these categories.

Scenario 1:

Hitherto you have been doing very well, things have been going well for you; you have been a very principled person and have done everything by the book (the Holy Bible). You have followed God's principles and you haven't compromised at all on anything. And then, when this challenge struck, this adversity has come in suddenly, you're beginning to feel like you need to give in a little bit. You are beginning to think: maybe if I just compromise on this one principle, I'll be okay, or if I make this one adjustment or this one compromise, I should be okay.

I was reminded of Clayton Christensen, and I have used this before, but it bears mentioning. He is professor emeritus at Harvard Business School, and he says in his book, “I have found out that it is easier to keep your principles 100% of the time than it is 99%; because once you give in, you’re on a slippery slope downwards.”

So, as you look at troubled times around; maybe work is not happening, business is not coming your way. It’s getting challenging and you don’t know how to navigate through this difficult time. You’re thinking – maybe if I just make one adjustment, if I just compromise on one principle, or if I just cut a corner here or there, maybe I can go through it.

But I want to remind you. 2 Corinthians 4:7-9 says, “*We are like common clay jars that carry this glorious treasure within, so that the extraordinary overflow of power will be seen as God’s, not ours.*” Beloved, that’s what God is willing for us. He is saying, “You are like a clay jar, but inside you carry my power that is going to help you to get through every situation and the power must be seen as God’s, not ours.”

Then He says, “Though we experience every kind of pressure, we’re not crushed.” At times, we don’t know what to do, but quitting is not an option. We are persecuted by others, but God has not forsaken us. We may be knocked down, but not out. How can this happen? When we allow God to work through our jars of clay.

So, my word to you that we can get from this passage is: Don’t give in at this time; stay strong and stand firm. Whatever that temptation may be, to be able to say, “I’m going through a difficult time but I’m not crushed. I’m not quitting. God has not forsaken me and I’m not down and out.” ***Stay firm; stay strong.***

Scenario 2.

Maybe till now, before COVID-19 happened, you’ve been doing extraordinarily well, and you’ve been enjoying all that goodness. You’ve been lavish about it and bought things for yourself, lived a good life. And maybe, you’ve even boasted and talked about being a self-made man, or woman. Now suddenly, the rug has been pulled out from under you and it’s like you’re down the stream without a paddle.

The thing is, before this happened, you were so enjoying life that you had even forsaken God. You were enjoying all the benefits but forgetting to go to the one who was your benefactor. You had done just what needed to get done – go to church on a Sunday, but didn’t really dig deep roots into Him. But now you’re down the creek without a paddle, and you’re really beginning to be frightened. The future is bleak. You can’t even make a calculated prediction about what to do, when normalcy will come back or what that normal will look like.

Maybe, you’re listening to this scripture that I just read, and it reads differently for you. You’re saying, “I’ve experienced every kind of pressure; I am crushed. I don’t know what to do, but quitting seems to be an option. I’m being persecuted by others, and it seems like God has forsaken me. It seems like I have been knocked down and I’m out.” Maybe that’s your reaction to this particular verse. You’re all but throwing in the towel.

What do you do in this situation? I think the key is to be able to realize certain things.

- To recognize where you are. To realize what is your current situation, where you have reached – a place where everything that you had has suddenly disappeared, a place where you are on unstable ground. You’re alone in these uncertain times.
- To understand how you got here. It could have been through unbridled living that you are now in this shaky place.
- Where you once were. Maybe that’s a place where you had a wonderful relationship with God, and you think: My goodness! That’s where I was. I never was in a place like this where I am so alone.
- How you can have all of that back. To once again have that good relationship with God.

We begin to think of the prodigal son in all of these areas. Suddenly he realized, “My goodness! I am in a pigsty, eating the food that is being given to pigs. How low I’ve fallen. I forsook everything that used to be so strong and stable for me. I left God.” I wonder whether that’s how you are feeling?

Well, if that’s where you are, that needn’t be the end of your story, because once you go through those areas and say, “Okay, this is where I am and this is what I will do – like the prodigal son to be able to say, ‘I will arise and go to my father and say to him: Father I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am not worthy to be your son.’”

Maybe, beloved, that ought to be your response as you listen to these scriptures. Listen to these words and say: I will arise. I need to get back to that point of stability, to that relationship that I once had with God, ask Him for forgiveness and say, “Lord, I’m a far way from home. But I’m coming back. Lord, will you take me?” And the image of a father waiting to welcome his son must be an image that should now be etched in our mind’s eye if you’re going to take that decision. So, if that’s where you are, the word for you is: ***Return to the Lord. Come home.***

Scenario 3.

Maybe till now, you’ve managed with life just hanging in there by your fingertips. you’ve just about managed. You had enough to last you a month, you had your job and you just managed to make both ends meet. And suddenly that’s changed. And the fact that you were hanging on, now it’s like you can’t do it anymore. Maybe you are on the verge of giving up and giving in. Maybe you are spending sleepless nights anxiously worried about how you can face a new day, how you can provide, how you can take care of your family. What is the future going to look like? Or maybe, you’ve gone into depression or even entertaining suicidal thoughts, become very bitter. You don’t have anything within you to go on.

I would say there is still hope. As Job said, “I know that my Redeemer lives.” And beloved, because your Redeemer lives, He will take you through this troubled time as well. You may think that this is the end and you can’t take anymore, but as we sang, “When you have reached the end of your resources, God’s giving has only just begun. And He will carry you through.”

I also want to say this to you – get help at a time like this. At the end of our service, the last screen will show you numbers that you can call if you need prayer, numbers you can call if you need counselling. Whatever you need, you can give us a call, and we’ll be able to come alongside and help at a time like this. But more than anything, remember that God will never

let go of you. His word to you is this: When you go through deep waters, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown. When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burnt up, the flames will not consume you. God will not give up on you, beloved. You may be thinking that you are at your weakest now, that you are unable to do anything.

I am reminded of a little boy who watched a butterfly trying to come out of its cocoon; there was a little crack and the butterfly was trying as much as it could, flexing its wings to come out. The boy looked at it and felt sorry for it. So, he broke the cocoon so that the butterfly would come out. But the butterfly just flopped out. Because the struggle of coming out of the cocoon helped to strengthen its wings. Maybe God is saying, "I've got you, but what I am doing for you now is just allowing you to get stronger. ***I've got you; I'm in control. Don't give up. Trust me.***

There have been many, many stories – people who felt that they have reached the bottom, and then came up to exhibit all the fullness that God still had for them in their lives, although they couldn't see it when adversity struck.

Joni Ericson Tada is a classic example. A 19-year-old teenager, full of life, dove into the Chesapeake Bay thinking it was the deep end. It was the shallow end and she broke her neck. She's been a quadriplegic since then. At that point, she couldn't see any worth in her life. forty odd years later, she's one of the best global diplomats for disabled people, differently-abled people, to help themselves and to still do something with their lives. She's travelled the globe and encouraged and inspired people who thought that their lives were just a meaningless existence.

Maybe, that's what you are thinking about your life today. Beloved, it is not. As long as we have breath, God has a purpose for you. Hang in there and He will see you through this difficult time.

I read this beautiful quote which said, "Ships don't sink because of the water around them; ships sink because of the water that gets into them." So, while there may be waves of uncertainty all around, don't let them get into you. Let God be in control and take you through this.

Proverbs 24:10 says, "If you faint in the day of adversity, then your strength is gone." So, don't faint; stay there and come through this stronger and more triumphant than you were before.

Before I close, I want to tell you a story about a young girl who came to her mother and told her how she had had an incredibly rough day. She was completely devastated by what had happened, and she didn't think she could go on. Her mother took her to the kitchen and placed three pans on the fire and filled them with water. In one, she placed carrots, in the other she placed an egg, and in the third she placed coffee beans.

After 20 minutes, she took them all off the pan. She took out the carrot, the egg and then ladled a little coffee out of the pot. Then she told the girl, "Touch the carrot," and the girl touched the carrot and found it had become squishy. The mother said, "When adversity struck, and the heat came, the carrot which was hard, became soft and malleable."

Then she said, “Touch the egg and break it.” So, the girl broke the egg and found that the egg was hard inside. The mother said, “Look at the egg. It was hard on the exterior and yet, soft on the interior. But now the hardness has crept inside the egg as well.”

Finally, she said, “Now look at the coffee beans. The coffee beans converted the hot water and made it useful for itself. It took the situation and circumstance of the hot water, and made itself into coffee.”

How does adversity affect you? Do you let it define you and change you? Or do you take the situation and circumstance and change them and make them work for you? Beloved, that is the question in each of those scenarios. We are all faced with adverse situations. The key in how history will record the way we handled this time will be in how we made use of the situation and circumstance, not how we succumbed to them.

So, let me recap:

- Being challenged today to give up on your principles, compromise or make adjustments? The word for you is – Stay strong, stay firm.
- The rug has been pulled out from under you and you are far from home? The word for you is – Come home.
- If you are about to give up because you can’t take it anymore, the word from God is – Hold on. God hasn’t let go of you.

Amen. Let’s pray together.

Our heavenly Father, in the quietness of these moments, Lord, as Your Spirit probes us and moves us and forces us to deal with the Word and to make a decision, would You fill every home where this Word has gone with Your holy presence. Lord, if there are course alignments that need to be made, will you spur each one of us on to make them. Lord, even as I pause, receive words from each person who is making a decision.

Maybe some of you need to say, “Lord I want to stand firm and not give in.” Maybe, some of you are saying, “Lord, I am coming home.” And, maybe some of you are saying, “Lord, please don’t let me go. Hold me tight.”

Beloved, God will take care of you. O Holy Spirit, would You seal these decisions that have been made. Undergird us, empower us with Your presence and enable us to walk triumphantly through this time, that we would be ones who would be watched by the world in wonder, wondering how we can go through this time with such grace, poise, and equanimity. And we will be able to say, “It is because God lives in me, and my redeemer lives!” In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.