



The Christian **LIVING IN ANY ENVIRONMENT**

Isn't it wonderful knowing that once we become children of God we begin living in a utopian world where there is no more pain or disappointment, no suffering or adversity? Unfortunately those words are far from true. Anyone preaching that message is spreading a false gospel. Jesus made it clear to his disciples and us when he said, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33.) The sinful world brings with it bad things. And as sojourners in this world, we are not immune to them. But we take heart. Not only does our Savior understand our plight, he tells us that he has overcome the world. We have seen in past sessions that today's Christian faces many types of adversity. Family life is crumbling, education is becoming a tool of Satan, technology has brought many new problems into the Christian's life, and the world is becoming ever more hostile to God's people. The good news is that no matter what pressures and problems we face, there is always the assurance that God is in complete control. Proverbs 19:21 promises us that the ways of Satan and this world cannot affect God's plans, "Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails."

One of the main questions unbelievers have is how a loving God can allow bad things to happen. What would you say to them?

A GREAT CLOUD OF WITNESSES

Throughout history Christians have faced many trials and dealt with all kinds of adversity. Oppressive governments, hatred, ridicule, torture, mental strain, illness, loneliness, and tragedy of every kind touch God's people. Yet this comes as no surprise. Hardship has affected God's people through the ages. We read in 2 Timothy 2:3, "Join with me in suffering, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus." And 2 Corinthians 4:8,9 tells us, "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed."

God does not leave his people to suffer alone. Rather he teaches his followers how to deal with every situation, always providing a way of escape. First Corinthians 10:13 assures us that, "He will also provide a way out so that you can endure it." In his Word we have numerous examples of God's people facing adversity. There is a steady parade of real people coping with real dilemmas. Hebrews 11 is filled with the names of devout believers who endured all sorts of trials. "Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground." Hebrews 12:1 assures us that, "Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us." And Romans 15:4 assures us, "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope." So how did these people deal with adversity?

Why do some Christians seem to suffer much more adversity than others?

ADVERSITY AND GOD'S PEOPLE

Romans 8:28 assures the Christian that, "In all things God works for the good of those who love him." We know that adversity visits the child of God just as it does the unbeliever. But there is a notable difference between the two. For God's people, every situation, every trial and tribulation, is intended for the good of the individual. That is why Paul can be certain that **all things** work for our good. Paul also reminded the Christians in Corinth, "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all" (2 Corinthians 4:16,17.)

Does any adversity happen in our lives of which God is not aware?

Adversity Shows Us Our Weakness

Nehemiah was sent by King Artaxerxes to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the walls of this once famous capital city, the crown jewel of God's Promised Land. The task was difficult. Years before the Babylonians had done a thorough job in burning down the temple and destroying the entire city. Now the walls needed to be rebuilt for the safety and protection of God's people. But there were enemies nearby who tried everything they could to stop the project. Nehemiah realized his complete helplessness in dealing with the situation and so he writes, "But I prayed, 'Now strengthen my hands.'" When we are at our weakest and our strength seems to have left us, it is then that we look to God to "strengthen our hands." Paul reminds us that God's power is made perfect in our weakness. Sometimes we need adversity to come our way to teach us that it is God who provides the strength to endure and face the situation. Nehemiah's prayer could well be spoken today by God's suffering children. Philippians 4:13 says it well, "I can do all this through him who gives me strength."

We must never underestimate God's power and strength. Too often we rely on our own abilities only to discover we cannot do it alone. This was evident when God told Moses to feed his people meat in the wilderness. Moses told God even if he slaughtered all the animals they had with them he could not accomplish the task. It was then God reminded Moses that it could be done with the Lord's help. God replied to Moses in Numbers 11:23, "Is the LORD's arm too short? Now you will see whether or not what I say will come true for you." God's arm is never too short to carry us through any adversity.

Explain what Paul meant when he wrote, "For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Adversity Gets Our Attention

How would you react to these words: "Get your house in order, you are going to die. You will not recover?" Unfortunately there have been many who have heard that message. Those were also the exact words that Isaiah spoke to King Hezekiah in Isaiah 38:1. King Hezekiah was a faithful king of Judah. During his reign he destroyed pagan temples and idols and reached out to the people to repent and follow the true God. At age 40, Isaiah came to Hezekiah and told him that he was going to die. So how did Hezekiah deal with the news? Isaiah 38 continues, "Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, 'Remember, LORD, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes.' And Hezekiah wept bitterly." As tears filled his eyes, King Hezekiah earnestly prayed to the Lord.

Sometimes God allows adversity into our lives to get our attention. It certainly worked with Hezekiah. Sometimes God allows terrible trials to enter our comfort zones to force us to face problems and to call on him for help. Such moments cause us to stop and lay aside earthly cares and schedules, dreams and aspirations. Instead we need to stop and evaluate our faith life and our relationship with the Lord. Such times cause us to rely and trust in God for wisdom, strength and perseverance to face the adversity.

Give examples in your life when God used adversity to get someone's attention.

Adversity Prompts Us to Self-Examination

Peter was a bold man. Among the twelve, he was the first to speak, the first to be recognized, and the first to show his foolishness. Peter loved to have the spotlight shining on him. He relished Christ's attention, and he enjoyed the position of leadership. At times he showed a powerful faith and true conviction. But there was one incident that he would love to have erased from the pages of Scripture. Confused and afraid, Peter and another disciple slipped into the courtyard of the high priest to try and learn what had happened to Jesus after his arrest in Gethsemane. While trying hard not to be noticed, three times he was asked if he was a follower of Jesus. Three times he denied any connection to his Lord. He had betrayed his Master in such a horrible way, and he knew it. Immediately upon self-examination, Peter wept bitterly for what he had done.

There are moments in every believer's life when adversity brings us to a point of self-examination. Like Peter, we are forced to look at ourselves in a mirror and ask, "Who am I and what is my relationship with God?" Such times will draw us ever closer to the Lord and bring about true confession and repentance. Lamentations 3:40 tells us, "Let us examine our ways and test them and let us return to the LORD." And 2 Corinthians 13:5 repeats, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves."

Why does God allow us to be placed in such situations? Because he loves us. Romans 8:37-39 assures us that, "We are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

How does the theme of self-examination manifest itself in the sacrament of Holy Communion?

Adversity Brings Us to the Word

Nicodemus was a troubled man. Since his youth he was trained to be a faithful Pharisee. Finally he reached the pinnacle of his career as a chosen member of the Sanhedrin. But Nicodemus was tormented. He heard of a teacher named Jesus whose message was different from what he was taught. He needed to find out what the truth was, so in the dark of night he searched for Jesus to hear his word on the matter. His meeting, detailed in John 3, points toward the need for Nicodemus to be born again in the truth of God's Word. The meeting ended with the beautiful words of John 3:16. Scripture later tells us that Nicodemus stood up for Christ in the Sanhedrin and he played a prominent role at the time of Jesus' burial.

Adversity comes to us in many ways. We may be ridiculed for our faith. We may be faced with family problems, health issues, mental or emotional anguish, or sudden disaster. Like Nicodemus, these problems should lead us to go to the Lord and hear his word on the matter. There is no situation we will encounter that is not addressed in Scripture. We should constantly be prompted to search God's Word for guidance, strength and comfort. We can pray with the psalmist in Psalm 119:105, "Your word is a lamp for my feet a light on my path."

How would you advise someone who comes to you and says they need guidance but have no idea where to look in the Bible for help?

How important is it to be in the Word every day? Why?

Adversity Leads Us to Rely on Christian Friends

All was not roses in the life of young David. His victory over Goliath brought with it praise from the people, but also hatred and envy from King Saul. The hatred grew so strong that David needed to flee for his life. Yet it was Saul's son Jonathan who befriended David and became a close companion who protected David and helped him escape Saul's wrath.

Unfortunately, adversity can at times draw us away from others as we concentrate all our thought and energy on our own trial. Yet God tells us that it is at such times that we especially need to rely on the comfort, prayers, companionship, and understanding of our Christian friends. Proverbs 17:17 instructs us that, "A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity." That means that we should likewise be a

comfort and help for our fellow Christians when they are in need as Ephesians 6:18 says, “Be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people.” And 1 Thessalonians 5:11 we read, “Encourage one another and build each other up.”

What would you tell a fellow believer who becomes gravely ill but does not want anyone in the church to find out about it?

What are some ways we can comfort our fellow believers when they are facing a difficult situation?

Adversity Leads Us to Pray

Jonah made a very bad decision. He felt that he could disobey God and not be found out. But we know that was not the case. His defiance led to disaster. After being thrown overboard, Jonah quickly sank into the abyss only to be rescued by a fish. For three days he lived inside that fish. Then in Jonah 2:1 we read, “From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God.” Jonah’s adversity had brought him back to God in prayer. As foolish as Jonah was, he knew his only hope was in the Lord.

Prayer is a unique blessing available only to God’s children. It is a telegraph line that connects us directly to the throne room of God. God’s love makes him accessible to us at any time and in every situation. And he promises to answer every prayer of his devout children. Through prayer we plead for mercy and deliverance from whatever trials we face. Through prayer we find comfort knowing God is there to hear us. Through prayer we find strength to face any situation. Through prayer we bring our problems to the only one capable of handling them. Can we ever ask too much? Joshua asked for the sun to stand still, Elijah asked God to send fire from heaven, and Hezekiah prayed for a cure. James 5:16 assures us, “The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.”

Discuss: Prayer becomes more real and fervent as we grow older.

Adversity May Serve as Discipline

King David was an exemplary man. He was a wise and fair king who had a deep love for the Lord. Reading his many psalms we get a glimpse of his love. But just as sin enters our lives, so David was not immune to Satan’s temptations. His adultery, murder and cover-up caused him great grief. Months afterward Nathan told David that his sin was a secret no more. David was about to feel the sting of God’s discipline. Because of David’s transgression, the baby born to him and Bathsheba would die.

No child enjoys a parent’s discipline. Correction hurts and points out flaws in our nature. Just as parents discipline their children because they love them, so at times the Lord lovingly disciplines his children by allowing adversity to come into their lives. We are his children, and God has a vested interest in our eternal welfare. That is why at times he sees the need to draw us closer to him by disciplining us. But we can be certain that he disciplines not out of anger, hatred, or as punishment. Rather his goal is to equip us to be diligent children. Such discipline produces character in becoming a stronger Christian. Romans 5:3-5 says, “We also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.”

We should also notice that God does not discipline only those who seem to be “disobedient Christians.” Rather, **every** child of God receives discipline. Hebrews 12:5-11 says, “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son. Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in

order that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”

If someone experiences hardship, can we surmise that it is because they have sinned and God is scolding them? Read John 9:1-5.

Adversity Better Equips Us for Spiritual Warfare

Acts 8 begins with the words, “On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.” We still live in a war zone. There is a constant battle being waged over our souls. One can experience that battle on the television, hear it in the music, feel it in the courtroom, see it in the classroom, and follow it on the internet. Satan is using every weapon he can find to destroy God’s people. And every Christian living in the world is at risk. We must be aware that he not only assaults God’s children physically, but mentally, emotionally, and spiritually as well. Ephesians 6:12 warns us, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”

Those who have fought in the front lines of a battle know the importance of being continually vigilant because the enemy has them in their sights. The Bible is filled with examples of brave Christians who endured extreme adversity. Noah was ridiculed, Joseph was imprisoned, Daniel faced hungry lions, and Stephen was stoned. Each stood strong against the devil’s assaults.

How thankful we are that the Lord provides specially designed armor for his people. Ephesians 6:10-18 speaks of this armor: “Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” As these battles are waged against us and our families, we should daily ask the Lord to renew our strength and to keep us armed with his Word.

Why should we and our children be constantly reminded to never remove or lay down our armor?

GOD IS WITH US ALL THE WAY

God assures us that as long as we live in this world we will have trials and tribulations. We cannot avoid them. But he has also promised that there will be an end to it all. A time will soon come when we will be forever free of adversity, guilt, pain and suffering. God knows every trial we meet, and he provides strength to endure each one. Isaiah 43:2 assures us, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.” Notice that those words do not say when you are stuck “in” the waters, “in” the rivers, and “in” the fire. Isaiah makes it clear that we will reach the other side, we will get “through” it all, just as David wrote in Psalm 23:4, “Even though I walk “through” the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.”

God also knows we long for a better world. Romans 8:23 says, “We wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.” For every believer that time will come soon. Until then, we are to walk as his children and to share his love with the world. Paul said, “To me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you

that I remain in the body” (Philippians 1:21-24.) And 1 Peter 5:10 reminds us, “The God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.”

Adversity may cause us great pain and deep concern, but it can never be greater than the joy we have in knowing that we are cherished by a loving Father. Hebrews 12:2 shows us this joy through Jesus, “For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” We know that the final victory will be ours. Our adversity only serves to strengthen us and give us hope and encouragement to continue our walk to heaven. It serves as a reminder that we have been adopted into the family of God as his beloved children. Paul summed it up well when he wrote in Romans 8:18, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”

Why does Paul compare our lives as running a race or fighting a fight? What is our goal?

What would you say to someone who is constantly living in fear?