

Lesson 7 – “Things Paul Learned About Adversity”

Sunday, February 28, 2010

Lesson Scripture: 2nd Corinthians 12:7-10; Mark 14:65; Matthew 26:39; Psalm 46:1-3

In today's lesson we need to examine some things Paul encountered and learned from adversities he received. If you remember one of Paul's adversities was called a "...*thorn in the flesh*" found in 2nd Corinthians 12:7. The word for "*thorn*" used in the Scripture passage refers to something that was sharp, similar to a pointed stake. It does not mean something small like a rose thorn or perhaps a sticker we find in the grass that once we pull it out, the pain will eventually go away. The idea is that Paul was continuously experiencing great pain and suffering. Additionally, Paul described his "*thorn*" as being from Satan; a messenger to "*buffet*" or beat him. The Greek word translated "*buffet*" is the same word that is used to describe the beating that Jesus went through that we find in Mark 14:65. There is no doubt that adversity comes in various forms and may or may not be of a physical nature. We may not know what form the next adversity will take; but we can rest assured that the individual going through the adversity will experience some form of emotional, mental, or spiritual pain. In today's lesson we want to cover four principles that we can apply to our lives when we experience adversity. The first principle we need to learn is to...

"Ask God for Deliverance" - In 2nd Corinthians 12:8-10 we are told that Paul pleaded with the Lord three times to remove the "...*thorn in the flesh*". He knew that it was there for a reason, but yet he still pleaded with God to remove it. Scripture does not teach that God will punish us for asking to be released from adversity. As a matter of fact, in Matthew 26:39 Jesus asked the Father to "...*let this cup pass from Me*". He asked the Father to release Him from having to die on the cross. We will be wise to do the same thing; to ask God to be released from adversity. Why you may ask? Because when we come to the Father and ask for relief, it is a statement of our faith in Him that He is in control and can release us if He wishes. He may do so immediately or He may wait until His perfect time is come.

Have you ever asked the Lord for relief from adversity? If yes, did He answer that prayer? What lessons have you learned through past adversity? What lessons is God teaching you today?

The second principle we need to learn is to...

"Recognize That I am not alone During Adversity" - When Paul asked the Lord to release him from his adversity, he tells us in 2nd Corinthians 12:9 that the Lord responded by telling him in "*My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.*" Paul was well aware that the Lord was with him during this time of adversity. If you believe it, it is comforting to know that God is always with you during times of adversity. He has promised us through the ages that "*I will not leave you nor forsake you.*" (See Genesis 28:15; Deuteronomy 31:6,8; Joshua 1:5; Hebrews 13:5; 1st Chronicles 28:20) Believers can be content in every situation they encounter because of this promise. There are six negatives utilized in these statements to emphasize the impossibility of Christ deserting believers. It is like saying "there is absolutely no way whatsoever that I will ever leave you". He may be silent, but He is still there. You may be frustrated because the Lord does not speak to you from heaven like He did with Paul. You may even be asking "Where is God when I need Him?" Silence should not be construed as God's abandonment or inactivity. He is constantly working behind the scenes in ways that we can not see. We need to realize that when God seems to be silent, we only have one option. That option is to trust Him fully.

The questions to answer for this section are listed on the next page.

Have there been times when you felt God had abandoned you?
What do you think is required of you in order to be able to believe His promise of not leaving us?

The third principle we need to learn is to...

"Trust God When He Chooses Not to Remove Adversity" - Continuing with the example of Paul, he came to the realization that God was not going to remove or reduce the pain of the "...*thorn in the flesh*" that he was experiencing. Instead, God gave him something else. God told him "...*My grace is sufficient for you.*" God does not always remove the adversity that He allows to come into our lives. While the Lord may not always remove our problem, He does however compensate for the pain and suffering that we are going through. We just need to realize what He is doing. In places where we are weak, He is strong. We know God is strong because of what Paul said to us in 2nd Corinthians 12:9 where God told him "*My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.*" When we feel we just can't make it, God can and will carry us through it. The verse says God's grace **"IS"** sufficient; not was sufficient or will be sufficient. The mission we have as believers is that we must trust Him every hour of the day, every day of the week. If we don't depend on Him, then we are trying to resolve the issue in our own power. When we do that we are destined to fail. Psalm 46:1-3 is a great promise for us to remember. It says "*God is our refuge and strength, A very present help in trouble.*" Please note that the verse says "...*a very present help in trouble.*" He is always with us no matter what we are going through. We can have great peace of heart and mind once we realize that God is with us during our trouble and He will never abandon us.

Has there been a time when you realized that God was not going to provide relief from an adversity?
In what ways did you see God walking with you? How can Psalm 46 encourage you in times of trial?

The fourth principle we need to learn is to...

"Rely on God's Power" - In 2nd Corinthians 12:10 Paul discovered that God's power reached its fullest when he was at his lowest points in life. He tells us "*Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*" Paul was telling us that through his adversities he learned to allow God's grace to be sufficient when he was weak. As a result, he became stronger. Paul in essence realized that when he was weak and relied on God, he was more energized by God's presence and power. Through this he became stronger. There is no pleasure to be derived from infirmities, reproaches, or persecutions; unless of course you realize that God's grace is sufficient and you are made stronger because of it. When we do that we can actually have joy like Paul during these times. Another thing we need to realize is that adversity is limited in time and scope - but God's spiritual blessings are unlimited and extend beyond time into eternity. You have a promise from God that if He does not remove adversity from your life, He will enable you to live with it triumphantly. He will also give you an inner peace that is beyond compare.

The questions to answer for this section are listed on the next page.

According to 2nd Corinthians 12:10, what was Paul taking pleasure in? Was he pleased with it or oppressed by it? Why?

Summary - In looking at this example, Paul gladly boasted during his adversity because he realized that when he was weak, the "...power of Christ" came upon him. Paul was not ashamed or embarrassed because the Lord did not deliver him. Nor did he boast to the Corinthians about his infirmity in order to obtain sympathy from them. Paul constantly pointed them to Christ who provides for them most when they are weak. We should learn from Paul's example in that we need to ensure that we do not use any infirmity or adversity as a crutch for our own selfish gain. We should not be ashamed of what may come into our lives and to be sure to give God the honor and glory for what He has done in our life. What God did for Paul, He will do for you. When you are at your weakest point, His strength will be strongest.

Paul has given us some other passages (listed below) that we need to review. When looking at these passages, please try to determine how they can relate to any adversity or adversities you have had or are currently experiencing. Also, please mentally answer the questions with each of the passages.

Philippians 4:11-13	<i>"...I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."</i>	What do you think is involved in being content? What did Paul focus on during his times of suffering? How did this help him find contentment?
Colossians 3:2	<i>"Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth."</i>	How does a person "set his mind" on something? What are the "things above" and the "things on the earth"?
1 st Thessalonians 5:16	<i>"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."</i>	How does a person "rejoice" during a time of suffering? How did Paul do it? What does Paul mean by saying "...in everything give thanks"?

Dr. Charles Stanley in his book gives us some thoughts and encouragements for today and tomorrow in each lesson. Below are the ones for us to consider with today's lesson.

Today and Tomorrow	
Today:	I am never alone, not even when life seems darkest.
Tomorrow:	I will trust the Lord in adversity, even when He does not remove the pain.