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#1338

Urban Legends
Difficulties Mean That God's Punishing Me

In his book, *In the Eye of the Storm*, Max Lucado writes, Chippie the parakeet never saw it coming. One second he was peacefully perched in his cage. The next he was sucked in, washed up, and blown over.

The problems began when Chippie's owner decided to clean Chippie's cage with a vacuum cleaner. She removed the attachment from the end of the hose and stuck it in the cage. The phone rang, and she turned to pick it up. She'd barely said "hello" when "ssssopp!" Chippie got sucked in.

The bird owner gasped, put down the phone, turned off the vacuum, and opened the bag. There was Chippie -- still alive, but stunned.

Since the bird was covered with dust and soot, she grabbed him and raced to the bathroom, turned on the faucet, and held Chippie under the running water. Then, realizing that Chippie was soaked and shivering, she did what any compassionate bird owner would do...she reached for the hair dryer and blasted the pet with hot air.

Poor Chippie never knew what hit him.

A few days after the trauma, a friend asked Chippie's owner how the bird was recovering. "Well," she replied, "Chippie doesn't sing much anymore -- he just sits and stares."

It's hard not to see why. Sucked in, washed up, and blown over. That's enough to steal the song from the stoutest heart.

"Sucked in, washed up, and Blown over" That about sums up how many of us feel at times doesn't it?

Life has it's way of putting us through the wringer. But if you're familiar with the Bible that should come as no surprise. Jesus made a lot of great promises to His followers when He was on earth. Here's one of those promises from John 16:33, *In the world you will have tribulation...*

While we don't like to experience it, the fact is that life is filled with troubles, trials, and heartaches.

The question we always have is, "Wait a minute. Why is this happening to me?"

We're in week three of a series we're calling Urban Legends. What we're doing is looking at some of the spiritual myths that are floating around and comparing them with the Bible to see the truth.

So far we've looked at 2 myths: "Faith Can Fix Anything" and "Following God Brings Good Luck."

Today we're looking at myth number 3 and that's "Difficulties In Life Mean That God's Punishing Me."

Is that necessarily true? Do problems always equal God's punishment? I can't tell you how many times I've heard someone say about a friend or a relative, "I don't understand why they have to suffer, they're such a good person," or "It's not fair, they haven't done anything wrong."

I guess it's just human nature for us to think that way. From little on up we're taught, "Do good and you'll be rewarded, do wrong and you'll be punished." "Do wrong and there'll be consequences."

So it's like we're programmed to think that problems equate to God's punishment.

I. The Myth: Difficulties Mean That God's Punishing Me

Open your Bibles to James Chapter 1 Pg 1072

The short letter we call The Epistle of James was written by James the brother of Jesus before 50 AD. This is one of, if not the, earliest New Testament books.

It was written to a very specific audience. It was written to Jewish people who had come to know Jesus Christ as Savior and were part of what was called The Diaspora. These were Jews who were scattered throughout the Roman Empire.

These were people who had some real problems. First, they were outcasts to their own people. Even though all the first followers of Jesus were Jewish, the Jews as a whole rejected Jesus as their Messiah.

Second, they were outcasts to the Roman world in which they lived. Not only were the

Romans polytheists who worshiped many gods, but they also practiced emperor worship.

To not worship the emperor as a god meant persecution and even death. So along with all the normal struggles of life these believers had the added trial of being outcasts in society. Getting a job, or even a place for their family to live would be very difficult.

Now you'd think given the circumstances of these people that James would try to comfort them a little. Maybe he'd say something encouraging to try to soften the blow a little.

Read vs 1-2

That's pretty intense isn't it? He says, "It's me James, writing to all you Jews who are scattered and I needed to tell you don't complain, instead rejoice when your suffering."

There are some hard verses in the Bible, that's a hard verse, isn't it? The Message translates this: *Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides.*

We don't usually associate words like "joy" or "gift" with trials and troubles. We don't want problems. We want everything to go smooth in life. We want our peace and comfort.

How are we going to count our troubles joy?

There are three very important questions that we need to ask when trouble comes. Three questions that will help us cut through the fog and see clearly.

Here they are. Why am I here in this situation? How should I respond to the situation? And, what can I learn from my situation?

I. The Myth: Difficulties Mean That God's Punishing Me

II. The Reality: Difficulties Come For A Variety Of Reasons

Why am I here in this situation? There are three options when we look at our problems.

1. God brought this into my life. 2. I brought this into my life. 3. I don't really know why.

Let's try to unpack those one at a time. First of all there are times when God brings things into our life.

Turn to Exodus 14 Pg 62

The Hebrew people have been slaves in Egypt for 400 years. That's about 6 generations that have gone by.

Do you ever feel like you're on a treadmill that never stops? Sometimes it's going fast and sometimes it's going slow, but it never stops. You just keep on with the same routine day after day?

Now imagine what it was like for a Hebrew enslaved in Egypt. Your parents were slaves and their parents before them and their parents before them.

You cling to your faith in God but you'd have to admit it's pretty weak.

Then a guy named Moses shows up with a message from God. "We're outa here."

That's what happened. Only the Pharaoh wasn't about to let his free labor force leave. So God brought a series of 10 destructive plagues on the Egyptians.

The last one was the death of the firstborn of every Egyptian household including Pharaoh's. That was it. That was the straw that broke the camel's back. Finally the Egyptians gave the Hebrew slaves their freedom.

Life was good (temporarily) until everything radically changed.

Moses is leading this group of over 1 million men, women, and children plus their animals. Then look what God tells Moses: **read vs 4**

Notice very carefully, it's God who's going to harden Pharaoh's heart so he'll chase them. And God gives the reason up front. *I will gain honor over Pharaoh and over all his army, that the Egyptians may know that I am the LORD.*

In another place God says to Pharaoh *But indeed for this purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth.*

When the people got to the promised land 40 years later they found a Caaninite prostitute in the city of Jericho who had become a believer. She had never heard a prophet, she had never seen a Bible but this is what she knew:

I know that the LORD has given you the land, that the terror of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land are fainthearted because of you.

For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were on the other side of the

Jordan, Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed.

And as soon as we heard these things, our hearts melted; neither did there remain any more courage in anyone because of you, for the LORD your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath. Joshua 2:9-11

That's a powerful statement of faith.

As we saw last week hundreds of years later the surrounding nations still were talking about what God did to Pharaoh at the Red Sea.

Read vs 5-8

God's got His plan but we don't always know what it is. **Read vs 11-12**

Sometimes we are in the middle of difficulties because God puts us there because He's doing something that will only happen if we go through the trial.

In this case it's very dramatic and obvious. God splits the Red Sea, brings the people through, and causes the waters to crash down on Pharaoh's army and destroy them.

So sometimes we're in the middle of a difficulty because God put us there for His purposes.

Sometimes, though, we're in the middle of a difficulty because of our own sin. **Turn to II Samuel 11 Pg 282**

This is almost 500 years later. Israel is in the promised land and they have a king named David.

Read vs 1-5

As it turns out this woman is actually the wife of one of David's most trusted soldiers. So what does this previously godly man do?

He tries to cover up by bring Uriah home so he would sleep with his wife and maybe think the child was his.

That doesn't work so as a last resort he has Uriah set to the front lines so that he would be killed and when he is takes Bathsheba and marries her.

Look at the result. God speaks through a prophet named Nathan. **Read 12:9-10 & 14**

Why did David, and the rest of his family suffer? Because David sinned and brought the trouble on himself.

Sometimes we're in the middle of a difficulty because God put us there for His purposes. Sometimes we're in the middle of a difficulty because of our own sin. And sometimes we just don't know for sure why we're suffering.

So the first question we ask is, why am I here in this situation? The second question is how should I respond to the situation?

Remember, Satan will always offer you a short cut. Don't take it. However you got where you are don't take it.

In Matthew four when Jesus was tempted by Satan it says *The devil took Him up on an exceedingly high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to Him, "All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me."*

What he was saying to Jesus was "Here's your chance to do things the easy way. You can avoid the cross, the pain, the suffering, the rejection. Just do it my way and you can have all this. Bow down and worship me. It's so easy. It's so painless."

Jesus said to him, *"Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.'"*

So what do we do? If it's a self-made mess we accept the consequences.

Turn to Hebrews 12 Pg 1070 Read vs 5-11

God's at work, even in the negative consequences.

Here's the beautiful truth of the Bible. God made rules for us to live by. They're not arbitrary. Each one is a reflection of His holy character and is for our good.

But just like Adam and Eve ate from the fruit in the garden, everyone of us have sinned and come short of God's glory. Everyone of us has disobeyed the rules in our own way.

God's holy character demands that the price of sin be paid. According to the Bible *the wages of sin is death.*

That means that our violation of God's rules aren't just some little mistakes that God will over look because He's a good guy. God judges sin.

But them in the amazing grace of God, God Himself made the payment for that sin. He took the judgement.

He came in the person of Jesus Christ, made Himself of no reputation, and went to the cross.

It was at the cross that the judgment for all of our sin was delt with. The Bible says, *Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, He was buried, and He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.*

Sin and death have been defeated. We have eternal life through faith in Christ. *The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

By faith God makes us part of His eternal family. And as the perfect parent He deals with our rebellion.

If we sin after we're saved we don't stop being His child. It's because we're His child that He disciplines us.

When that happens we need to accept the consequences. Not to despise what God is doing, or become discouraged but allow God to use the consequences of our wrong doing to teach us and mature us.

So if it's a self-made mess we've gotten ourselves into we accept the consequences. But what if it's a situation the God's placed us into that has nothing to do with rebellion on our part?

Turn over 1 book to I Peter 4 and look at verse 19 (Pg 1078)

God our Creator who became our Savior can be trusted. We can commit our lives to Him even when life doesn't make sense for us. It's amazing how many times God takes our response to trouble and uses it to open a door into someone else's life. Someone who wouldn't have listened to God's truth if it wasn't for seeing our trust in God.

God has brought some phenomenon people across our path here at this church over the years. One that really stands out to me is Ed Wipert.

Ed would argue about the Bible at the drop of a hat. He just knew it wasn't true. Then Ed was diagnosed with cancer. All of a sudden his perspective changed. He was open to God and eventually trusted Jesus Christ as his personal Savior.

Ed would be some place like a store, or at the hospital for chemotherapy treatments and he'd be whistling with a big smile on his face. Inevitably someone would ask him, "What are you so happy about today?"

And that would be Ed's open door to say "I'm so happy because I have cancer. I was just going on in life trying to avoid God when cancer caused me to have to face the question, what happens when you die?"

And he'd tell them his testimony, how because of cancer he was willing to listen to the gospel. Because of cancer he came to know Jesus Christ as his personal Savior. How because of cancer he now had the assurance of eternal life.

Ed became a living example of James 1, *count it all joy when you fall into various trials.*

I. The Myth: Difficulties Mean That God's Punishing Me

II. The Reality: Difficulties Come For A Variety Of Reasons

III. The Response: We Can Always Respond God's Way To Difficulties

Do difficulties always mean that God is punishing me? They may or they may not. But our response always needs to be patterned after God's command in James 1.

We started in James 1, let's go back there as we look at that response in more detail.

James 1 pg. 1072

Let's reread verse 2 First of all trials can have a positive effect in our life if we handle them God's way. That's why James can say *count it all joy.*

It's like he wants to jar us from self pity and discouragement. Unless we see something more than just the problem we're in, we're sunk.

If all I see is what's pressing in on me, I'm not going to have any hope. I'm going to be depressed, overwhelmed, and discouraged.

Here's where hope comes from. Here's how I can break out of the trap of self pity. Because whatever the reason for the suffering, I can have the confidence to know that God's at work in my life.

That doesn't mean I have to enjoy the pain. Hurts and struggles aren't fun. They're things that stretch us and put us to the test.

But joy comes in seeing the fact that God is at work.

Now what usually happens to all of us when stuff comes down on us is our first response is, "I can't take it. I can't go on. This is too much."

God, through James, says "Change your thinking." He says, "count it all joy." That means respond with a deliberate, intelligent, appraisal. Not just an initial emotional reaction.

A believer in Jesus can look at the experience from God's perspective and rejoice in the knowledge that God's up to something in our lives.

So trials have a positive effect on our life if we handle them God's way and one of the things God wants to produce in us is endurance.

Read vs 3

There's a couple of key words in verse 3. One is the word "testing." Our English word "test" just means to check out. It doesn't carry any idea of what the test will show, good or bad.

The Greek word that the Bible uses here is the word *dokimion* which comes from the verb *dechomai* which means "to receive," or "to accept."

The word testing here means "to test with the expectation of approving."

In other words God isn't saying, "I'll test you to see if you have faith." God already knows whether we have faith or not. He doesn't need to give us a quiz.

He's saying, "I'm using trials to strengthen your faith." His tests are designed to strip away all the phoniness and falsehood so that He can develop positive endurance in us.

The other key word is the one translated "patience," or your Bible may say "perseverance." It's the Greek term *hupomone* which is a compound word made up of the preposition *hupo* which means "under," and the verb *meno* which means "to stay," or "to remain." Literally it means "to remain under."

Patience in this case means the ability to hang in there without giving up. It's not just a passive resignation, it's strength, endurance, and perseverance.

Does that mean that when we face a real difficult time in our life that we've failed if we have times of doubt or weakness or if we feel like we're not going to make it?

Obviously not. There's plenty of examples of people in the Bible showing some of their human frailties.

But we do fail if we simply say, “I can’t,” and we give up. At that point what we’re really saying is “God can’t. His Word isn’t true. His promises have failed.”

The Apostle Paul was a man that God used to write over half of our New Testament. When you read his story as he traveled around the Roman Empire telling people about Jesus he was beaten, imprisoned, and left for dead on more than one occasion. He had it pretty tough.

But he could write this: *For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.* II Corinthians 4:17

In other words he was saying, “Hey, what’s going on is tough, but I’m not judging it as if this life was all there is. I’m judging it in light of eternity.

Somehow we’ve gotten it into our minds that we have a divine right to a comfortable life. I shouldn’t get sick. People I love shouldn’t die. There should be no accidents. I don’t read that in my Bible.

But we think that way. Then when difficulties come, whether they’re money problems or sickness, or the death of someone we love we say, “God, why did you let this happen to me?” As if trials don’t happen to followers of Christ.

Here’s what we need to remember, God loves us. He loves us so much He turned His face away as His Son took your sins and my sins upon Himself at Calvary.

He loves us with a love that’s totally off the charts. What He allows in our lives is for His purpose. His plan is to make us strong and able to rejoice in all things.

Read vs 4 All this takes time. We just need to make sure we don’t short circuit what God is doing by cutting a trial short in an illegitimate way.

How could we do that? There’s several ways.

For one thing we could be so insistent on relief from our pain that we grab the first thing that comes along that seems to give us relief. For one person that might be 6 pack, for another it could be having an adulterous relationship with someone at work. There are all kinds of ways of grabbing for relief.

Another thing we might do is give up and just retreat into depression. Not that every depressed person has given up on God but we end up in depression if we do.

But there's another way to short circuit what God is doing in our life that's a lot less obvious than the others. That would be to do right but not submit our heart to God.

If we're not careful our attitude can be, I want something from God, instead of, I want to live to please God.

We say, "Ok, God, I'll obey you to get my husband back, or to help with my kids, or to straighten out the mess I'm in with my boss at work."

And so we put some verses into practice and the pressure is temporarily relieved. But it's only a temporary thing.

We've short circuited what God is trying to do and that's to cause us to trust Him and serve Him from the heart. In the end we fail to let patience have it's perfect work.

God's not interested in quick fixes. His goal is that we be complete, spiritually mature, and the fact is, spiritual maturity can never come about without having our faith exercised through adversity.

I was talking to a dear lady in our congregation this past week and I commented on how many things she's had to face in the past few years. She said, "You're right, but I wouldn't have the reality of faith that I have now if I hadn't gone through them."

Do difficulties mean that God is punishing us?

He might be disciplining us, he might be working through us, whatever the case we know we can trust God because He is faithful. The supreme illustration of that faithfulness was what happened one day on a rocky ridge outside the city of Jerusalem.

To everyone involved it appeared that God had let Jesus down. The mocking crowd cried out, *He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now if He will have Him.* Matthew 27:43

But that wasn't God's plan. God's plan included suffering and pain, but the end was the salvation of all who would believe.

The Bible says, *Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?* Genesis 18:25

He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? Romans 8:32