

Contagion

Week 5

I got a private Facebook message a few weeks back. It wasn't from one of my friends ... actually one of my friends had suggested that "Freddie" (Not his real name) Have a conversation with me.

It seems that "Freddie" had a couple month old Down Syndrome daughter. It was He and his wife's first child.

"Freddie" of course is running scared. Our mutual friend knew that I also had a Down Syndrome daughter and though I would be a good resource for "Freddie".

After sharing my cell phone # with "Freddie" and having him call me ... we started into our "let's get to know each other" part of our conversation.

We both went to Johnson Bible College. We both grew up in the same part of North Carolina, but he's 12-15 years younger than I am.

"Freddie" and his wife serve in Bangkok, Thailand as teachers in a school, and "Freddie" serves as the coach to many of the school's sports teams.

He then told me how he found out that his daughter had Down Syndrome, and what that news did to him.

It seems the whole ordeal and the fact of his ideal "picture perfect" life being crushed ... has begun to cause Him to doubt God's power; or even to blame God.

So ... somehow, God saw fit to insert me and my story into "Freddie's" life.

I spoke to him and told him our story, how Charity was born in the back seat of a Chevy Aveo, there was so much excitement in the air as they rushed us up to the room, and then the bombshell announcement of the POSSIBILITY of Down Syndrome. And then I told him how much of a blessing that Charity has been to our life and to our church. I told him that the things that he fears most about the situation ... is what God intends to be a blessing instead.

But what would you do if you were in “Freddie’s Shoes?” If you thought your world was collapsing ... how would you respond?

Maybe a better question would be, “How SHOULD a Christian respond when hard times come?”

Because we are ALL going to face hard times sooner or later. Yours may not be from an unexpected announcement about your newborn ... but you ARE going to go through some kind of trial.

In 1 Thessalonians 3:1-8, Paul wrote to some new believers who suddenly and unexpectedly found themselves in great difficulty.

They were being persecuted for their new faith in Jesus. And in TODAY’S text we are going to see how Paul reassured them. And from what Paul shared, we can find 5 truths about hard times.

#1 Our trials knock us out of our comfort zones

1 Thessalonians 3:1-3a

So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. ² We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God’s service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, ³ so that no one would be unsettled by these trials.

Do you remember what it was that they couldn’t stand? They couldn’t stand being away from the Christians of Thessalonica. Remember at the end of chapter 2 they had tried and tried to return but Satan had blocked their path?

There are two words I really want you to notice. The word “unsettled” and the word “trials”.

The word “unsettled” actually means to “wag the tail.” It’s what a dog does when it gets excited.

-Dogs in the Dominican – Justus got them excited!

Here the context is: Paul does not want the hard times to cause these new Christians to get excited about something else other than the Christian faith.

You know how it goes ... tough times come ... and too many times we JUMP with excitement at the first way out.

(Wag tail) Oh yeah, I'll TELL A LIE to get out of here.

(Wag Tail) Oh yeah, I'll do something a Christian shouldn't do to get out of here.

The word "trial" here paints a picture of being under GREAT pressure. You know the kind, the kind that keeps you up at night worrying, and keeps you looking tired and haggard during the day.

If you take the time to survey the New Testament teaching on trials, 2 things are going to keep popping up:

1st, trials are going to be the rule not the exception for all Christians. There are NO EXEMPTIONS, on one is getting a worry-free ride to heaven.

If you don't think you need this sermon TODAY ... take good notes because you may need it NEXT WEEK!

2nd, whatever trial comes your way really doesn't matter ... what matters is how you respond to it.

Too many times we focus so intently on the difficulty, that it becomes the most important thing in our world ... but it's not really. Because God is more concerned with how you RESPOND than with the trial itself.

WHY? Because most of the time we don't have a choice about the bad things that are going to happen to us. Usually they just happen. But you can control HOW you respond. Will you respond in faith or in unbelief? Will you respond in humility or arrogance? Will you respond in anger or in hope?

James 1 tells us to "Count it all joy" when you face trials. But that's not possible as long as you only focus on the trial ... but if you make a slight adjustment, and shift your focus to God, THEN you can find joy even in the worst moments of life.

#2 This is what we signed up for!

1 Thessalonians 3:3b

For you know quite well that we are destined for them.

Some believe that having a hard trial means that God is angry at the believer. The truth is that God loves us enough to give the *best* when we may only desire what is *easy*. The symbol of Christianity is a cross, not a couch or a feather bed. Trials are a part of following Jesus; therefore Paul recognized that Christians are destined for them.

You signed up for them ... so you should Expect Them!

In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know.

We need to remember that trials are not entirely negative. They may in fact be a sign that we are in the will of God.

The story is told that on one occasion when John Wesley had no rotten eggs thrown at him for several days, he wondered in his diary if he had somehow failed to preach the gospel properly.

The Bible Knowledge Commentary says it this way:

“When trouble comes, Christians often react by doubting that they are where God wants them to be; they often think they have done something wrong and that God is displeased with them. Even some mature Christians react this way, as evidenced by Paul’s words of reassurance to Timothy many years later. ‘Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted’ (2 Timothy 3:12).

So the storms are going to come ... but these storms often come to believers to make them able to stand firm, rather than to blow them away.”

#3 Trials can lead to temptation

For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labors might have been in vain.

How & Why would the Devil tempt in HARD times? I can think of 3 obvious reasons:

1st: He tempts us to doubt God's goodness. He whispers in our ear that God has forgotten us, that He doesn't care ... **trying** to get us to think that God is not good.

2nd: He tempts us to retaliate against each other with anger and resentment.

3rd: He tempts us to give in to despair and discouragement. You feel like YOUR particular trial is the end of the world.

You put all of these together ... and I think Satan's big hope is that we give up our faith in God altogether.

I think this is what Paul fears for the Thessalonians. He's afraid that under pressure they may choose to give up on God.

Paul's been under pressure ... he knows what he has been tempted with. He's afraid that they will give in to bad habits, wrong attitudes, and then begin the long slide in the wrong direction.

And this is going to be a part of each of our journeys ... so we need to consider how we are going to respond when OUR trials hit.

#4 We CAN overcome by faith

But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you.

Here in verse 7 Paul clearly explains that we can OVERCOME our trials by faith.

What kind of faith does he have in mind? WELL ... the same kind of faith that has been explained to our young students in VBS this week.

Look at the BIG ideas that they have been taught:

- a. **God made you**
- b. **God listens to you** (Elijah versus the prophets of Baal. Janet Hatfield pregnant after she was told it was medically impossible! She believes it happened because WE prayed for her! She believes that God listens)
- c. **God watches over you** (Psalm 139:12 – “Even in darkness I cannot hide from you”)
- d. **God loves you, NO MATTER WHAT** (Psalm 139:24 – “Lead me along the path of everlasting life.”)
- e. **God gives good gifts** (Psalm 139:5 – “You place your hand of blessing on my head.”)

Lastly or 5th **Others will be encouraged when they see US stand firm.**

(Verses 7-8) Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. ⁸ For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord.

Here is a big hidden truth that you need to know about hard times. Someone will watch how you handle it.

They are going to draw conclusions about you and your faith as you go through your trial ... and they are going to draw conclusions about God.

In this case, the great Apostle Paul himself is drawing strength from the courage of these new believers. Although he had come to minister to them ... they were now ministering to him.

I started today’s message by talking about Freddie and his new Down Syndrome daughter. Freddie is under trial ... I have been through a similar trial and God **somehow** connected us.

But you remember how **I** responded to Charity’s original on site diagnosis right?

Remember how she was born in the back seat of our Chevy Aveo ... and we were running on pure adrenaline, I was already dreaming of how cool of a chapter this is going to be in my auto-biography.

Then we get upstairs and we get the news ... "There are some indicators of Down Syndrome." Anita and I are both thrown for a loop.

After a couple of minutes I leave the room, and I begin to burn up the phone lines. NC, Lafayette, Indiana; Dyer; Griffith; Fortville, Indiana; Heyworth, Illinois; Linden, Tennessee; I get home and post it on Facebook ... and I am asking EVERYONE to pray that it's NOT Down Syndrome.

People all around the world are connected and are praying for us. We have to wait 2 weeks to get the actual diagnosis ... and it does come back as Down Syndrome. But by that time, we are already completely head over heels in love with little Charity Grace, and it's a lot easier to accept.

My faith was NEVER tested over Charity having Down Syndrome, but I do know the overwhelming emotions that "Freddie" is feeling. I wanted to encourage Him that his daughter was going to be a blessing and in no way a curse. But, I couldn't have done it very well, unless I had also been through the trial.

Allow me to close my message with THIS thought. Many people in THIS congregation are going through hard times right now. I wish it were not so, but it is true.

Almost weekly, I hear new stories of pain.

After thinking about the issue of trials, I have concluded that even if I HAD the power (which I don't), I don't think I would take away everyone's pain or make the hard times disappear.

I know that God is going to use EVERYTHING that comes your way to shape your character into the character of Jesus Christ.

There are no short cuts to spiritual maturity. If I did somehow take away your pain ... I may actually be removing something that God was going to use to shape or re-shape your life.

Because I can only see things from a human perspective, I might actually hurt you instead of help you even though my motives would be good.

It might not be GOOD to suffer ... but suffering can be good if it leads us to be more Christ-like.

The Bible tells us that weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning.

Let us then, try to endure our trials with grace and even with joy ... knowing that eventually the clouds will part and the sun WILL shine again.