

The Challenges and Blessings of Tough Times

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"For there must also be factions among you, in order that those who are approved may have become evident among you." 1 Cor. 11:19

The above scripture points to a very interesting biblical truth - trouble "must" come in order to reveal what God is blessing or can bless. When we're doing well, this truth receives a solid, "Amen." When we ourselves are in the trouble, we say, "Amen" and "Oh, me!"

The following verses put this idea in an even clearer perspective but not one any less painful:

"I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it, that it may bear more fruit." John 15:1-2

That which is approved of God must periodically be pruned by Him in order to become more fruitful and/or to cut away that which does not belong. So, there we have it. Trouble reveals who has God's favour and "trouble" reveals what must be removed for further growth to take place. In the short-run, we will have trouble so that in the longer run our root structure is more vibrant and productive. Once again, we know these things are true but holding this perspective in challenging times can be a real test of faith. Let us then in essay form examine some of the dynamics and lessons to be learned around God's laws of testing and pruning.

Lesson Number One: It's Easier to Be "Spiritual" During Hard Times Than Easy Times

"When you have eaten and are satisfied, you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you. Beware lest you forget the Lord your God by not keeping His commandments and His ordinances and His statutes which I am commanding you today; lest, when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived in them, and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiplies, then your heart becomes proud, and you forget the Lord your God who brought you out from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. But you shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He who is giving you power to make wealth, that He may confirm His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day." Deut. 8: 10-14, 17-18

In our falleness, how easy it is to lapse into pride and self-centeredness! Conversely, when we are "up against it," and living in the clear knowledge that God must intervene if we are to keep things afloat, it is often much easier to cling to the Lord. Testing therefore scrapes the barnacles off our spirits and sharpens our sense of dependence upon God and obedience to the scriptures, the Holy Spirit, and sound counsel from others.

While the vicissitudes of the economy may make tests more "explainable" and give us a sense of common testing with others we would do well to remember that God can and sometimes does test us during even so-called "good times." Square one is to remember that the first issue during a test is to ask the questions: "Lord, what are You after, and Lord, have I become spiritually complacent or proud?" Tough times often make these questions come from the deepest parts of us.

Lesson Number Two: We Can Always Get By With Less Than We Think We Can

Another lesson God gives us in tough times is that we don't always need what we think we do. This can come in the form of a reduction of money, capital, time, personnel, accounts, and any other form of person or thing that we have come to believe is indispensable or a "personal right." God is into proving us more adaptable than we may think and more dependent on Him than we usually think. The pruning knife of God is sharp and precise though never cruel. It may cut off what we hate to see go but it never cuts off what God knows we need to fulfill His call on our lives. That fact must be held on to and it is precisely where the enemy attacks. God is often accused of leaving us without what we consider to be our essential resources. That, by definition, is never true.

Lesson Number Three: Trials and Tests Allow Us To See New Possibilities

As all of us know who have gone through significant trials, tests, or hard times, trials press us into seeing possibilities we don't see until we are in or through the tests. New paradigms or seeing "old things" in new ways is the very positive result of pressure that forced us to look at how things could be done in ways we originally didn't see, or didn't want to do in the first place.

In this regard, let us briefly look at three different aspects of new possibilities. Firstly, let us look at the issue of our personal identity, the identity of someone else, or the identity of the organization. Under pressure we examine the question, "Am I seeing who this person really is in terms of skills, placement, calling, self-limitations, etc.?" Frequently God leads us into pressure in order to either reveal a new facet of identity or begin the process of repositioning. Secondly, we need to look at the issue of God dealing with our relational skills. What are we missing within the organization or with those we serve outside of the organization? In the marketplace, communication is everything. What is this "test" saying about how we're doing in this area?

Thirdly, we should look at the general area of stewardship skills. Are we caring for and bringing increase to what we're already stewarding or are we falling into the trap that the "answer" to our problem is simply getting more? While volume is often a very important issue, it can also be an illusive trap.

God seldom gives us "more" when we aren't properly cultivating the garden into which He has already set us. Economic pressure often reveals inadequate stewardship more than the need for simply growth.

Lastly, let me touch on an area I have addressed for many years in business and that is the issue of seasons. God has built a system of cycles into our space-time world. We ignore them at our own peril. "Tough times" are usually about the season of winter. Winter is by design slow. It is a time to cut back; rest; repair; strategize; repair equipment; remove debris; prepare new seed; reflect; and generally assess. It is also a season of freezing temperatures that kill bugs, weeds, and other impediments. It's a good time and not to be resisted.

None of us enjoy these challenges until we begin to see that they are a gift. They give us the opportunity to re-tune and grow, and they help weed out the competition. Lord, let us follow our brother Paul's example:

"Not that I speak from want; for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me." Phil. 4:11-13

I say "Amen, let it be."

By Dennis Peacocke. This article originally appeared in the April 2002 edition of Business Reform Magazine.