

TIMES OF TESTING

Psalm 55

A pastor had just married a young couple and gave the groom a parting word. “Son, God bless you. You are at the end of your troubles.” A year later the groom returned to the pastor and complained, “What a year I’ve gone through! And you told me I was at the end of my troubles.” “Yes, I did,” said the pastor. “I just didn’t tell you which end.”

Michael Le Boeuf in his book, *Imagineering*, lists a number of corollaries to Murphy’s Law:

1. Nothing is as easy as it looks.
2. Everything takes longer than you think.
3. If there is a possibility of several things going wrong, the one that will cause the most damage will be the one to go wrong.
4. If you perceive that there are four possible ways in which a procedure can go wrong, and circumvent these, then a fifth will promptly develop.
5. Left to themselves, things tend to go from bad to worse.
6. Whenever you set out to do something, something else must be done first.
7. Every solution breeds new problems.
8. It is impossible to make anything foolproof because fools are so ingenious.
9. Nature always sides with the hidden flaw.

Now do you feel better? Not really. Maybe we feel a little better if we can find some humor in our situations. But the truth is we are well acquainted with tough times, aren’t we? We know what it is like to go through a dark period. Life even in the best of times has its times of trials and tribulations. And these days have been especially tough on an even greater number of people. We are not strangers to the times of testing. We have been there and many of you may be there now.

How do you handle it? How do you get through it? Do you have advice or answers you have learned? Does the Bible have any answers?

Here are some things I have observed during times of trial and testing I have gone through in my life. And hopefully some things I have learned or answers God has given me.

First of all, they are very difficult. These times have lots of different names I suppose because they have happened to so many different people. Maybe everybody has to go through one at some time or another. Sometimes we call them times of testing, times of trial or tribulation. They have been called times of wilderness, times of darkness. These experiences have also been referred to as the “dark night of the storm.” It really doesn’t matter what you call it, you know it when you are there.

And it is just plain hard. It is a very trying time. It is lonely. It feels like no one can really help you, though many may try. Sometimes you experience prolonged discouragement. Sometimes you feel depressed. It is a tough time.

Often these times feel like it is taking forever. You keep wondering when it is ever going to end. There seems to be no end. You wonder if you will ever see light at the end of the tunnel. And of course that just makes you feel worse.

And you spend a lot of time dwelling on things. You spend a lot of time thinking, reflecting, trying to process things. And sometimes you realize that that doesn't help much. Often it makes you feel worse because it is easy to entertain thoughts that are not helpful. It is easy to entertain thoughts that take you down wrong paths. Your mind can work for you or against you. And often when left to dwell and go where it will, your mind becomes your worst enemy.

Also, often you have no idea why you are going through this period. You feel clueless. You feel like you are not privy to what the goal or agenda is. You have no idea why this is happening. You feel like you are in the dark.

And finally lots of times you just want to get away! You keep praying that this will all go away. You want to flee. You want to escape.

Does any of this sound familiar? Maybe we should start some support groups! Hard times support groups. It might be the most successful small group project we've ever had. I would imagine there would be lots of us who are viable candidates.

Let's see what God might be trying to say to us in some of these scenarios. How about the feeling of wanting to escape? One of my favorite characters in the Bible is David. David is so open with his life. David did a lot of great things and made a lot of great accomplishments. But he also had his share of trials. Saul spent many years trying to kill David. David spent much of his life running for his life. His own son, Absalom raised up a small army and started a rebellion against his father, David. After David squashed that rebellion, another of his soldiers, Sheba, started a rebellion against him. These stories are found in II Samuel 18-20. Some people believe that David wrote Psalm 55 in response to these events that were going on in David's life.

"Listen to my prayer, O God, do not ignore my plea; hear me and answer me. My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught at the voice of the enemy, at the stares of the wicked; for they bring down suffering upon me and revile me in their anger. My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death assail me; Fear and trembling have beset me; horror has overwhelmed me. I said, 'Oh that I had wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest—I would fly far away and stay in the desert; I would hurry to my place of shelter, far from the tempest and storm,'" (Psalm 55:1-8). Did he nail anybody there? Did he speak for you?

Someone did a study and wanted to see if you really could escape troubles. They studied a group of people that wanted to desert the rigors of life and decided to move to a

small island off the coast of Florida. Life was simple and easy. Everything was casual and “laid back.” But before long, the pace began to quicken and soon the people were struggling with the same maddening feverish pace they had known before. The problems turned out to not be external or environmental. The outer distractions only reflected their inner conflicts. The people had simply carried their problems with them, concluded the study. Rearranging the environment only provides temporary relief.

I have discovered that we can be a lot more patient during the time of testing if we know that there is a positive reason for what is going on. We often feel like we are merely a cork bobbing in the water with no control whatsoever and totally at the whim of the currents and tempest. The story of Job reminds us that sometimes the wilderness experience is a combination of both the Enemy and God working in tandem. In Job’s case, the Devil wanted to take things away from Job. He believed Job would deny God and turn his back on God. God decided to go along with things. God allowed some things to happen. God never left the scene. God didn’t abandon Job. And he never let the Devil do irreparable harm to Job. But God also had an agenda in what was taking place. God was going to restore everything back to Job in the end to an even greater degree.

Often the same is true in our lives. God never tempts us. It is the Enemy that tempts us. Temptation is designed to bring you down. That was what the Devil tried to do to Jesus in the wilderness. He threw at him the temptation of self-interest. Knowing that he was hungry he tempted him to turn the stones into bread. He threw at him the temptation of the seduction of power. “I will give you all the authority of the kingdoms of this world, that have been given to me.” He tempted him to perform a publicity stunt to further the Kingdom of God. “Throw yourself off the temple here and let your angels bear you up.” Satan does the tempting. His agenda is our destruction. His agenda is our downfall.

God, on the other hand has a very different agenda. His agenda is always your salvation and your growth. God is trying to get you to another place in your relationship with him. James tells us that God cannot be tempted with evil and himself tempts no one. But God will discipline us. And he will allow us to go through times of testing in order to prepare us for some greater work or for some greater level of relationship with him. Sometimes we cannot see at the time exactly what he is trying to do. Sometimes he is showing us things about ourselves during these times. Sometimes we are blind to limitations in our lives. We are confused about our real identities. And the ordeal opens our eyes to understandings about ourselves that we never knew.

One of the things that God gave me during a prolonged wilderness experience to keep focusing on with my mind was this saying: “*God never allows in his wisdom what he could have prevented in his power.*” That made sense. Though I couldn’t see exactly what he was trying to do, I knew that God was all-powerful. And I knew he could bring it all to an end if He wanted to. So for some reason he was allowing this in his wisdom for a reason that He knew and I didn’t.

A daughter was telling her mother how everything was going wrong in her life. She was failing algebra. Her boyfriend broke up with her. Her best friend was moving away. Meanwhile her mother was baking a cake and asked her if she would like a snack. Her daughter said, Sure, Mom. I love your cakes.” “Here,” she said. “Have some cooking oil.” “Yuck,” said the daughter. “How about a couple of raw eggs?” “Gross, Mom!” “Would you like some flour then? Or maybe some baking soda?” “Mom, those are all yucky.” To which the mother replied, “Yes, all those things seem bad all by themselves. But when they are put together in the right way, they make a wonderfully delicious cake!”

That is often the way God works. When we are going through these difficult times, we don’t understand why. But all the while he is putting these things together in just the right order and they end up working out for our greater good.

A group of ladies were doing a Bible study and came across the passage in Malachi: “...*For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver...*” (Malachi 3:2b-3a). One of the women offered to find out the process of refining silver before the next gathering. She called a silversmith and made an appointment to come watch him work. She didn’t tell him anything other than being curious about the process. As she watched the silversmith, he held up a piece of silver over the fire and let it heat up. He explained that in refining silver, one needed to hold the silver in the middle of the fire where the flames were hottest as to burn away all the impurities. The woman thought about God holding us in such a hot spot; then she thought again about the verse “He sits as a refiner and purifier of silver.” She asked the silversmith if it was true that he had to sit there in front of the fire the whole time the silver was being refined. The man answered that yes, he not only had to sit there holding the silver, but he had to keep his eyes on the silver the entire time it was in the fire. If the silver was left a moment too long in the flames, it would be destroyed. The woman was silent for a moment. Then she asked the silversmith, “How do you know when the silver is fully refined?” He smiled at her and answered, “Oh, that ‘s easy—when I see my image in it.” “When I see my image in it!” God often lets us go through fires, refiner’s fires, all the while keeping his eyes close on us, until finally his image is seared into us!

David continues in his Psalm, “*But I call to God and the Lord saves me. Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice. He ransoms me unharmed from the battle waged against me, even though many oppose me,*” (Psalm 55:16-17). Then a few verses further down he instructs us, “*Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall...But as for me, I trust in you,*” (Psalm 55:22, 23b).

That’s always the answer isn’t it? Even though it seems so hard at times. I heard about some people that were making a flight when suddenly the light “Fasten your seatbelts” came on. Then a voice came on the intercom, “We will not be serving the beverages at this time because we are expecting a little turbulence. Please be sure your seatbelts are fastened.” Many of the passengers became apprehensive. Later the voice came back on the intercom, “We are sorry that we will not be able to serve the meal at

this time. The turbulence is still ahead of us and appears to be a little stronger than we expected. Then the storm broke loose. You could hear cracks of thunder. Lightening lit up the skies. The large plane was like a cork tossed around on an ocean. The plane was lifted up one minute and then dropped the next. There was a lot of discomfort and fear among the passengers. Some were upset. Others were alarmed. Some had their eyes closed and were praying. Many wondered if they would make it through the storm. But there was one girl that was oblivious to it. She had tucked her feet beneath her as she sat on her seat. She was reading a book. Everything in her world was calm and orderly. She moved around every once in a while, but there was no worry or fear.

When the plane finally reached its destination someone spoke to her and told her how brave she was during the flight and asked her why she had not been afraid. And she replied, "Cause my Daddy's the pilot and he's taking me home!"

We know what it is like to go through storms. We know about storms and times of testing. Physical storms, mental storms, financial storms, domestic storms. We know what it is like when it seems like everything is going wrong and nothing is going right. But we also need to remember who the pilot is. God is our pilot. And he is in control. And he is taking us home! He is taking us to new places in our relationship with him.