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Challenger

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Misfortune or Mercy?

By Jeff Bonzelaar, Executive Director

Can anything be truly called a “tragedy” for the person who is in Christ? In other words, is it ever appropriate to label hardship that a believer faces as “tragic” or “awful” or “unfortunate?”

I do not mean to come off as one who is cold or indifferent to suffering. I am not a stoic. Nor am I denying the presence of evil. There are many things which happen in this world to followers of Christ which are wicked, vile, and contemptible. Physical and sexual abuse, marital unfaithfulness, thievery, and slander come immediately to my mind.

But the word “tragedy” implies ruinous or damaging. It suggests that which is detrimental or unprofitable.

So the question is: Should words like “tragedy” or “disastrous” or even milder words such as “misfortunate” or “regrettable” be used by a Christian to describe events to which he or she is subjected? *Hurtful* . . . yes; but *harmful* . . . ?

Eight years ago my wife and I lost a child. Lori was pregnant with twins but, due to complications, had to be delivered three months prior to her due date. Although we got to hold baby Logan in our arms, at 1 lb. 15 ozs. he didn’t have enough to make it on his own. We never felt the warmth of Logan’s touch or heard the sweetness of his cry. His twin brother, on the other hand, pulled through but only after a shaky

three month ordeal in the neonatal intensive care unit. We thank God that Jordan is now a healthy, fun-loving 1st grader.

Just writing about these events brings a certain grief to my heart. Lori and I had desires and dreams which were just not meant to be. But as we look back, we now see the mercy of God in it all.

In the Bible we meet a man who had some dreams which *were* meant to be, but the path he had to take to get there was brutal. Betrayed by his brothers, falsely accused and sentenced for a crime he didn’t commit, and sadly forgotten by a friend—if ever a man was dealt what should have been a knock-out punch, it was Joseph (see Genesis 37 ff.).

Amazingly, Joseph didn’t collapse under the pain of those 13 long years of intense trials. He rose above

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the hurts and disappointments. Those things which could have become stumbling-blocks became stepping-stones. There in the land of his captivity, he was miraculously promoted to second in command. After marrying, he had two sons and symbolically named them Manasseh (“forget”) and Ephraim (“twice fruitful”). Not only was he able to supernaturally forgive those who had wronged him, he flourished in a place where he should have floundered.

Eventually, he had a face-to-face meeting with the brothers who had sought to remove his memory from the earth and had robbed him of his precious youth. To those men Joseph said, “Do not be angry with yourselves, . . . because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you” (Gen. 45:5). Wow! He was comforting those who had afflicted him.

Joseph had a perspective we all need. While he did not dismiss the wrongs his brothers had committed against him as inconsequential, he was able to look past the apparent misfortune and see the mercy of God. At the end of his life he reaffirmed what he had told his brothers years before, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Gen. 50:20).

For the believer, there is no “tragedy.” Romans 8:28 declares that God works out *everything* for our good (i.e., benefit, advantage). Whatever the setback, trouble, abuse, or pain, God strips them of their destructive power and makes them work for our good and His glory. All that comes to us ultimately is mercy—whether God sends it in the form of a “yes” or a “no.” God knows what is best and acts accordingly.

Such a mindset or understanding frees us from bitterness, despondency, self-pity, and anxiety. Knowing that whatever “misfortune” comes our way God means it as mercy, we become empowered to live as

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over comers.

CONCLUSION

I’m not being ultra-picky when it comes to words. Words make a difference. How we describe reality affects our attitudes and behaviors. It’s hard to “rejoice evermore” if I’m calling something regrettable. It’s hard to move forward if I’m seeing something as misfortunate.

But more is at stake than your or my overall good behavior and well-being. God’s glory is on the line. When I am calling something “tragic,” I am communicating things about God which are not true—that he is not good or wise or faithful or sovereign. I am belittling God and suggesting that he doesn’t make a difference in my life—my reality—when it matters.

I wholeheartedly agree with author and pastor John Piper: “Let us make crystal clear at the beginning of each new day, all we will get from God as believers in Jesus is mercy. Whatever pleasures or pains may come our way in this day, they will all be mercy.”

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.”

(Ps. 23:6).

—TESTIMONY— Roosevelt Roots

“I was born and raised in Inkster, Michigan. I am 35 years old and the youngest of five children. My mother is a born-again believer who took me regularly to church from the time I was very small. I came to the place where I hated attending church and when I was old enough, I quit going.

All my brothers and sisters except one smoked pot and drank. It seemed to me that these things were okay because they weren’t adversely affected. They were able to work and function and had nice houses and cars. I couldn’t wait to grow up and be just like them. When the opportunity presented itself in junior high, I began smoking pot. I didn’t see anything wrong with it.

When I was about 16 years old, I discovered crack-cocaine. It was the ‘in’ thing and my drug

friends and I would mix it with our marijuana. I managed to graduate from high school, but my life became consumed with getting crack. I checked into my first rehabilitation center at the age of 19.

When the first rehab failed to ‘cure’ me, I went to another in South Carolina. I thought maybe a change in geography would help, but I found crack there as well. A year later I had to leave town because of all the bad checks I had written in order to get more drugs. When I left, my girlfriend was pregnant.

I managed to clean up my act for a short time after my daughter was born in 1993, but I soon hit the skids again. Shortly after my relapse, I was watching the evening news and saw a segment about Life Challenge (it was called Detroit Teen Challenge then). I remember seeing people just like me kneeling at the altar and praying.

The reporter doing the segment said that the program had an 86% success rate for those who finished. There was a phone number on the bottom of the screen and all of a sudden something inside me just said, ‘That’s the answer. That’s your way out of this affliction.’

I called the number the next day and made an appointment for an interview. Upon arriving and walking into the building, I knew this was what I was supposed to do. But after hearing about all the rules, I chickened out and decided I couldn’t do it. At the time I couldn’t see being away from my daughter and girlfriend for a year. I just wasn’t willing to submit to a lot of the things and so regrettably I said, ‘No.’

I tried another 12-step program but that didn’t work either. I ended up back on the streets using drugs for many more years. My girlfriend finally gave up on me and I didn’t see my daughter for a long time. I burned every bridge with everyone who loved me. No one trusted me any more. My sense of self-worth was shot.

In 2003, my daughter (who was 11 at the time) called me and told me her mother had just passed away. I didn’t know what to do. I was so confused

and in bondage. I didn’t even bother to go and comfort my daughter. I just continued getting high.

The breaking point came one night after I stole my sister’s car to go out and get more drugs. The car broke down and I abandoned it. I didn’t have the guts to face my sister who had always been so good to me. I spent the night on a friend’s couch and cried out to God and made the decision to call Life Challenge the next day. This time I was ready to submit to everything. I was broken and couldn’t go any further on my own.

I entered the program on February 16, 2004. I remember a feeling of peace as I walked through the doors. The Spirit of God came over me, and I knew eventually everything was going to be all right. That first night, as I sat in my room, I read Psalm 51 and poured my heart out to God. I cried and cried for all the bad things I had done and all the people I had hurt. For the first two weeks in the program, all I did was cry. I confessed my sins to Jesus and felt the assurance of His forgiveness. I was so filled with gratitude and thanks that God had brought me to Life Challenge and to Himself.

Jesus has been so good to me. He has restored every broken relationship that I had destroyed. My daughter wrote to me while I was in the program and told me she was proud of me. My sister even let me use her car when I went home on a pass.

When I look back and think about how Jesus never left me, I am truly humbled and amazed. To God be the glory!”

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Grace, mercy, and peace be yours in Jesus Christ,

*Jeff*

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