

DEALING WITH LONG-STANDING PROBLEMS

(Jeremiah 4:10; 15:15-21; 30:12-15)

An Article by
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From time to time, faith brings us face to face with situations which stretch our understanding of God and His will for our lives. Long-standing problems, seemingly resistant to prayer, can drag us back in our pilgrimage with God. The usual pat answers fail, such as persevering in prayer, trusting constantly in the Lord, casting our burdens on Him, when we have tried them and it seems there is no move, or at least there is not the kind of move that we desire.

Problems generally tend to have three effects on us:

(1) They can push us into the trap of reducing faith. They get bigger and stronger than our faith day by day. It is important to retain our confession of faith that God is sovereign in our affairs, He is the Almighty and there is nothing that is beyond His redemptive powers.

(2) Problems tend to block our view of God. They make it difficult, even nigh impossible to see God at work in our lives. For us Christians, we see God only through the window of Christ, the Son has revealed the Father, and our relationship with the Father is through the Son. Therefore, God is our Christ-like God. Problems tend to shut this window, bringing in gloom and darkness, in the form of doubt and disbelief. This can be accompanied by despair and depression. We must not allow problems to shut our window of faith. The knowledge of Christ brings much light, and God is near at all times, no matter how desperate our situation is. In fact, the more difficult our problems, the greater the access we have into the presence of God.

(3) Problems can evoke a feeling of frustration, disappointment and bitterness towards God and our fellow believers, sometimes even against the whole world. When this happens, serious illness which can endanger both our physical and spiritual health is around the corner. We must not allow our faith to decline so seriously when truly God is for us at all times, and the challenges of life are merely stepping stones to greater grace, perfect peace, and vital victory in the hands of God. The psalmist says, 'My times are in your hand ... When I cry out to you, then my enemies will turn back, this I know because God is for me ... Whenever I am afraid, I will trust in You!' (Psalm 31:15; Psalm 56:9, 3)

In other words, by our attitude we can turn the negative effects of long-standing problems into benefits. For instance, we can allow the three-fold process of grace to work actively in our situation; this is the process of sanctification, glorification and justification by faith by which we experience the transforming power of God and live victoriously in spite of our problems!

Sanctification

The apparent meaning of sanctification is "consecration". This is the biblical ritual by which men and women are set apart to minister in the name of God. When they are sanctified, God's people are set apart to live exclusively for Him, their whole life is oriented towards Him as they seek not to please themselves but to please Him. As Christians, we are consecrated by God's Holy Spirit, and there is an on-going work of sanctification in our lives by which we are enabled to fulfill the righteousness of God. As scriptures testify, "We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10) But sanctification means more than what we do for God, it also means what God is doing for us, in us and through us. It means primarily that God is walking closely with us, He has become our covenant-partner, our Friend, the Great One who shares in our humanity and partakes in our vulnerability. This is what we understand as we look upon the Man Jesus Christ. Sanctification is "God-with-us" in every experience of life, in times of joy, in times of sorrow - laughing with us, crying with us, going through life with us as the most constant companion of faith. No wonder, scriptures can speak of our infirmities being laid upon Him, and consequently, by His stripes we are healed - strengthened, renewed, redeemed, blessed, made fortunate beyond human expectations.

Times of adversity can truly enrich our communion and fellowship with God for as we continue to depend upon God in faith and trust, we obtain a richer certainty of His support and strength. Our understanding of His goodness and mercy becomes far more certain as God brings to bear upon our earthly situation the touch of heaven, a spirit and an attitude which does not resent suffering but embraces it as part of our calling in Christ Jesus. (Exodus 19 :1-6; Isaiah 46:3-4; Isaiah 63:7-9; Philippians 3:8-14) Sanctification is not simply to enable us to walk with God, but more importantly it enables God to walk with us. Our burdens become lighter when we know that God is walking with us, and that He will roll our burdens away at the time of His choosing through whatever means at His disposal. No wonder the psalmist can say "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. (Psalm 23:4)

Glorification

To be glorified is to be ennobled, to be given rank and status. This biblical phraseology simply attests to the fact that through Christ Jesus we are no longer enemies of God, we have become His covenant people. Our sins are forgiven, we are no longer strangers and outsiders, we are members of the family of Christ. We have been adopted through His atoning death and by the Spirit of reconciliation, we are now begotten from above through the executive will of God. In other words, even though God has come to us (as we see above, through sanctification), He has similarly raised us up to be with Him. God is immanent, that is, He is with us and in us. But God is also transcendent, He is beyond us, He occupies a realm which is far higher than the highest heavens. God is Spirit, He is not flesh, accordingly, He dwells in glory and majesty far beyond any human conception. To be glorified is to be made to partake of something of the glory of God. We are lifted up, through Christ Jesus, and made to sit in heavenly places with Him. Eternity is now in our hearts, and all things have to fit into it. Whatever is not important in the span of eternity, that is, whatever is not crucial to our experience and expectation of eternal life, is truly not important no matter how much weight is given to it by the world. We no longer see ourselves merely according to the values and fashions of this world, we reckon

ourselves as accountable to the values and norms peculiar to eternal life. Christ is our reckoning book. Accordingly, the problems that we experience in this life cannot be compared to the glory of the life to come!

For this reason, the time-reference (time-span) of long-standing problems is a marginal fraction in the span of eternity. Problems, no matter how permanent or insoluble they may seem, will not follow us into eternity. They end here, in our earthly state and condition. Problems have a short span indeed, when viewed from the vantage point of eternity, especially as eternity is not an empty fulfilment of our faith in God, but rather the crowning of the saints of Christ - our glorification. We have been glorified through believing in His atoning death, yet eternity will unravel the totality of this experience when we taste, not death, but everlasting life in all its imperishable freshness. In short, long-standing problems can enrich our expectations of the glorification that awaits all the sons of God, when we shall see Him and be with Him forever more. Meanwhile, patience and endurance become practical attributes of our lives. We are not passively waiting for death, we are up and about doing what He did - good works, renewing our communities by our calling, our faith, our love and hope. (Luke 16:19-31; Philippians 2:5-11; 2Timothy 2:1-13; Ecclesiastes 3:1-11)

Justification

Justification is the biblical word for the righteousness which we inherit through the atoning death of Christ. Our own righteousness is like filthy rags because we can never measure up to the standards of God. Yet, mysteriously, as heirs of Christ, we obtain divine favour because we accept that it is only through His own blood that a perfect sacrifice for all unrighteousness is found. We are set free from guilt, from the natural inclination which attributes blame and penalty for the things which we have done wrong. Of course, we do not escape all the consequences of our misdeeds, or genetic disorders. We still bear the brunt of our errors sometimes in our bodies, for instance illnesses which are consequent to smoking or alcohol and drug misuse, or casual sex. Genetic problems, even though they are inherited, and therefore not problems of our own making, are consequent to the Fall when creation through sin became prone to faults. Of course, genetic problems may also be consequent to exposure to a dangerous environment such as harmful radiation and pollution.

In short, we are human beings, we are vulnerable to errors genuinely committed out of ignorance, or the sheer irresponsibility of others - being in the wrong place at the wrong time, doing the wrong thing for the right reason, or doing the right thing for a host of wrong reasons, and having to face really nasty consequences! God does not promise to make us escape the totality of the consequences of our errors, neither does He simply make excuses for our wrongdoing.

But the meaning of justification is this: God knows our frailty, and in Christ Jesus He accommodates it and moulds it to conform to His own divine purposes. The psalmist says: "For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust." (Psalm 103:14) For this reason, God actively desires and seeks to put an end to our long-standing problems! God is not interested in needless suffering or discomfort, neither will He be defeated by what defeats us. (Joshua 5:7-9; Luke 18:1-8) However, God works in time and over time to inaugurate His own plans and purposes; and, whilst undoubtedly He shares in our sufferings and distresses, He does not always intervene according to our expectations.

We can, however, assert as Job did: "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; And after my skin is destroyed, this I know, That in my flesh I shall see God, Whom I shall see for myself, And my eyes shall behold, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!" (Job 19:25-27)

Armed with the attitude of Job, and Christ's model prayer - "Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will" - all unbearable yokes, whether physical or spiritual, are bearable with His anointing; the illnesses that we grudgingly welcome and those difficult and desperate situations which we never pray for yet have happened to us can only be borne when we depend upon His own strength. "My grace is sufficient for you" is not the retort of an uncaring or an impotent God, it is truly the answer from an almighty God who suffered His beloved Son to die on a Roman cross like a criminal because He knew very well that the outcome of that death will bring many others to glory through their redemption.

The crux of the matter is this: problems - long-standing or not - work to the benefit of God's redeemed people, either directly in this earthly phase or in the world to come. God's people are justified, not because of or in spite of their problems, but rather because their problems are part of a single process - God, through Christ Jesus, is renewing the whole of creation, making all things perfect and wholesome according to the mysteries of His love. (Romans 8:16-25; Romans 8:28-39; Jeremiah 30:16-22) Wait for it: problems form part of the process of justification by faith! (Habakkuk 2:4)

May God grant us the strength and hope to face our predicaments. May He bring us full deliverance and perfect us in joy and peace as we wait upon Him. Beloved, look up, your salvation is near! Amen.