

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Valuing what God has given us: The experiences God gives us

"It's all down to the cards you were dealt" is a favourite expression of a colleague of mine. He believes that we were all given certain "cards" or talents, experiences and opportunities and we have little control over what then happens in our lives. To believe in a blind, heartless fate is desperately depressing, but it is also a "one size fits all" excuse. If we adopt this attitude, it effectively allows us to abdicate responsibility for what happens or does not happen in our life, for what we achieve and for the kind of person we become.

Before we go any further I would like to read a few verses from the Word of God, the Bible. They will be the foundation for what I have to talk about.

The first verse is Jeremiah 29:11: "For I know the plans that I have for you," declares the LORD, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.'

Next, can I read Isaiah 64:8: "But now, O LORD, You are our Father; we are the clay, and You our potter; and all we are the work of Your hand."

Then Romans 5:3-5: "And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation works patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope: and hope makes not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given unto us."

This week's talk is titled "Valuing the experiences God has given us". And as a Christian, I believe that God has a definite goal that He is moving me towards. I think we can clearly see from the verses I have read that, just as in the previous three talks, we should value the time, talents and friends that God has given us; so we should also value the experiences that God allows in our lives. Life is not just a mindless game of chance but has a plan and purpose directed by God Himself. The question is, however, am I prepared to learn and benefit from these experiences?

There are a number of things we must accept and believe, if we are to benefit and be strengthened by what we experience. I think the first is the confidence that God has a plan for me. It is the very best plan, and will ultimately be for my good. To believe this must depend on the relationship I have, or you have, with God. In fact, do you have a meaningful relationship with God at all? People might call Christianity a religion, but in reality it is a relationship! The great Creator God has such a deep interest in, and care for, His creation. There is a wonderful passage in Proverbs 8 which speaks about this: "Jehovah possessed me in the beginning of His way, before His works of old. I was set up from eternity, from the beginning, before the earth was. When there were no depths, I was brought forth, when there were no fountains abounding with water. Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth; while as yet He had not made the earth, nor the fields, nor the beginning of the dust of the world. When He prepared the heavens I was there; when He ordained the circle upon the face of the deep; when He established the skies above, when the fountains of the deep became strong; when He imposed on the sea His decree that the waters should not pass His commandment, when He appointed the foundations of the earth: then I was by Him His nursling, and I was daily His delight, rejoicing always before Him; rejoicing in the habitable part of His earth, and My delights were with the sons of men." Proverbs 8:22-31.

It is clear from Scripture that God has always existed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. A Triune God, a wonderful, loving eternal relationship. Amazingly God wants us to know and share in the joy of this relationship. God's Son, Jesus Christ, came to earth to demonstrate by His life and by His teaching, His loving relationship to God as His Father. By His death at Calvary, He paid the penalty for my sin and guilt, and made it possible for me to have peace with a Holy God and also to know God as my Father. On the morning of His resurrection the Lord Jesus spoke to one of His followers and said "I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God." John 20:17.

We can now know God, not as some lofty impersonal, disinterested being, but as a loving and caring Father! As a father myself, I know that I want the very best for my children. I will teach them, discipline them and care for them, as best I am able. I will plan for their future and support them. But I will also make mistakes! God doesn't! This is the first lesson to learn if we are to rightly value the experiences God gives us. Our relationship to God is as His children, and we must learn to rest in the knowledge that He does know best, and He desires the best for us! This is what is

acknowledged in Isaiah 64:8 "But now, O LORD, You are our Father; we are the clay, and You our potter; and all we are the work of Your hand."

In a general sense I suppose that we would distinguish between what we would call good experiences and bad experiences. I can look back on my own life and give thanks for many, many good experiences. I can also look back at several things that have happened to me or those close to me that, at first sight, can only be described as bad experiences. I am sure this is true for each of us and hopefully for most the good will outweigh the bad. But can God use both the good experiences and the bad experiences to advance His purposes in my life? Would a loving, all powerful Father allow bad things to happen to His children? It is all too obvious that some appallingly bad things happen in this world, and Christians are in no way exempt from these events. Can God use even the bad experiences we have for our good and even the good of others?

Yes He can! The story of Joseph as related to us in the book of Genesis, the first book in the Bible, clearly illustrates this fact. Joseph was the eleventh son in a very large family. There were a total of twelve sons and several daughters. Jacob was the father and the children were born to 4 or 5 different mothers. This was a perfectly normal arrangement at the time but inevitably there were a lot of tensions and rivalries in the family. Jacob showed favouritism towards Joseph which served to deepen the jealousies and resentment that already existed. In due course, Joseph's older brothers had an opportunity to get rid of Joseph. They didn't kill him, although some of them wanted to. Instead they sold him as a slave and he ended up in Egypt serving a prominent, noble family. Joseph eventually, through being wise and diligent in his work, became a trusted and valued servant.

Just when Joseph's life had seemed to be settling down, he is falsely accused of the attempted rape of his master's wife and is thrown into prison. Joseph had every cause to think that, as my friend would say, "the cards were stacked against him" but he didn't think that. In time and in a miraculous way he comes to the attention of Pharaoh and is able to assist him when no one else can. Joseph is promoted to a well deserved position of power in the land of Egypt and, through a series of events clearly planned by God, is brought face to face with his brothers again. The men are clearly terrified when they realize that the brother they had treated so abominably was in a perfect position to exact revenge. They didn't understand Joseph's character and nature at all. He said a remarkable thing to his brothers. "But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive." Genesis 50:20. Joseph wasn't at all bitter about what had happened to him but rather acknowledged that it was allowed of God.

Joseph's experiences were the result of the envy and rivalry of others; they were desperately scary and unpleasant. But they were also allowed by God to prepare and mould Joseph to be the right person, in the right place, at the right time! Joseph is by no means unique in this. In the Bible we can read of many others who, like Joseph, went through extraordinarily difficult experiences which God used to shape and prepare them for a particular purpose. The story of Daniel is another case in point as is the story of the un-named girl who was a servant to the wife of the Syrian general Naaman. Both suffered thoroughly unpleasant experiences because of the wickedness of other people but were ultimately used by God for the blessing of others.

The title of today's talk is not "life's experiences" but "Valuing the experiences that God gives us" And that is what is important! Why do some people end up bitter and twisted, totally disillusioned with life, and others who have had equally difficult things to deal with, shine as people to look up to and value?

We must accept that God is in control and has a purpose in all that He arranges or allows. There is a really important lesson to learn in 1 Kings 12:24. There the few people who were loyal to King David appeared to have justifiable cause to fight to restore the kingdom to his successor, Rehoboam. God spoke to these people through His prophet and told them not to fight as "this thing is from Me". Can I patiently and honestly accept that as I belong to God all that is allowed in my life is from Him? "This thing is from Me". I hesitate to talk about this. We sometimes rather tritely quote the verse from Romans 8:28: "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose." But some of us have never had to prove the truth of this verse in desperately sad circumstances.

My parents had the awful experience of having a policeman come to the house to tell them their firstborn child had been killed in a car crash. The pain and grief was devastating, but Dad told me that they did learn to accept that "that this thing is from Me." We may never understand during our lifetime why seemingly pointless tragedies happen; but we do need to learn that God is in control and has a purpose. Or as we read, "'For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.'" Jeremiah 29:11.

Obviously not all of us will experience these sorts of circumstances. Many of us can look back over many pleasant times in our life. I think of David growing up in a loving family in Judea, having the freedom to play among the beautiful countryside there and learning to be a shepherd caring for his father's sheep. He had time to develop his skills as a musician; he appreciated the beauty of nature. He had opportunity to hone his skills with the sling which he would use

to guide and protect the flock of sheep. But he too was faced with dangerous and difficult situations which would prepare him for the future.

This is the next lesson we learn. Our experiences, if travelled in faith, are preparing us for our future responsibilities. What David learned during those days and nights on the hills of Judea caring for his father's sheep was preparing him for the far greater responsibility of kingship. Training as a shepherd is the very best preparation for leadership! The interest and welfare of the sheep is paramount. Are they safe? Do they have enough clean water? Can they graze safely? Before David had to care for the nation of Israel, he learned to care for the sheep! Before David tackled Goliath, he had already tackled a lion and a bear! He had proved that God could be trusted to help him in more mundane, everyday situations, before he was required to demonstrate the same trust in a much more public and extraordinary way.

So when Goliath challenges the nation of Israel to send a man to fight against him, it's little David in his shepherd's cloak who goes, rather than big King Saul in his armour! What David had experienced defending the sheep he attributed to God, rather than his own ability, and consequently goes down into the valley of Elah to meet Goliath, in the confidence that his God would again be victorious! In a similar way, the Apostle Paul, in a Roman prison, can say, "But my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus" Philippians 4:19. Paul had proved that God could and would supply their needs.

So our experiences, if valued correctly, can be used to build and strengthen us. I think this is possibly what Paul has in mind when he wrote, "And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation works patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope: and hope makes not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given unto us." Romans 5:3-5. Paul had a tremendously positive attitude to difficulties; he boasted in them! Not because he wanted a difficult and troubled life, but because he had learned the benefits that accrue. Tribulation is a hard word. These were not just little minor difficulties that Paul was speaking about. But Paul had learnt that God had promised to be with him. These difficulties taught him patience. From them he experienced God's faithfulness, which confirmed to him the certainty of the hope he possessed in the Lord Jesus. In increasing measure, he appreciated the love of God that was being flooded into his heart by the Holy Spirit.

But it isn't just our painful and difficult experiences that we should learn to value. We might not remember them in the same way but all our happy and positive experiences should be valued as well. It is easy and natural to seek to repeat pleasant experiences. Maybe we even try to perpetuate them; this could be selfish. There is also a certain amount of danger of relying on good experiences. I was listening to "*Songs of Praise*" the other day, and it was great to see a group of young Christians clearly enjoying singing hymns together at a Christian Convention. I am quite sure that a lot of us have really enjoyed occasions like that, I know I have! But it's not an everyday experience. For most of us the daily reality falls some considerable way short of the once or twice a year experience of crowded tents singing with thousands of other Christians. We must use these experiences to refresh ourselves and recharge our spiritual batteries and be careful not to be disillusioned or discouraged when we have to return to the office and work!

Paul, writing from a Roman prison, speaks to the Christians at Philippi and says, "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, to be content. Both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: everywhere and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Philippians 4:11-13. This is clearly a development of what we have already read in Romans 5 when Paul had written about boasting in tribulations. He had passed through a vast range of experiences. He had seen the power of God working in a miraculous way in his own life and the lives of thousands of others. He had experienced dreadful suffering on account of the Gospel and he had been changed by these experiences for the better. It isn't natural to boast in tribulations! But Paul had been shaped by his experiences and lived out every day the Gospel that he preached!

Go back to Isaiah 64:8 and the picture of the potter and the clay. It is clear that if the clay has hardened it can no longer be shaped as the potter intends. Am I in a condition that will allow God to shape me as He desires? Paul clearly was malleable, able to be shaped and changed. Paul had once described himself as "proud and overbearing", now he was the very opposite! Am I prepared to be formed primarily by the Word of God, but also by the friends I have and the experiences God leads me through? Or am I hard and unyielding? There are several reasons why we are sometimes slow to benefit from our experiences. Quite often we are more than happy with the status quo! A certain degree of self-satisfaction and complacency! Sometimes it is the hardness of un-confessed sin permitted in my life.

When God led the Children of Israel through the wilderness for forty years He was teaching them, through all the various situations they faced, that they were sinful and had many short-comings but that He, Jehovah, was utterly faithful and all-powerful!

There is something else we can gain from our experiences, and that is the ability to understand and sympathise with others who are passing through similar circumstances. We are taught in Hebrews that one of the many reasons that

the Lord Jesus lived here was so that He might be able to sympathise and support us. It is incredible to think that the Son of God became a man and really did experience many of the joys and sorrows that are part of our human existence. Jesus can and does sympathise with us better than anyone else. But it is also true that we can use our experiences to understand and help those who are struggling to cope in situations similar to those we have experienced.

It is entirely possible to feel completely alone, even in a crowded church! Are we concerned to watch out for those who seem to be carrying a heavy burden? Are we available to listen and talk? I know that if I am struggling with a problem I would rather talk to someone who has experience with a situation similar to mine. Do I value my experiences in this way? Am I prepared to make myself available to encourage and support others who are having a hard time? Am I using what I have learnt from what are often painful experiences to help and encourage others? It would be wrong to force our sympathy onto someone! But we can convey by a caring attitude that possibly we do understand and maybe can help. "Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep." Romans 12:15.

Ultimately what God has in mind for us from all that we experience is that we should be more like His Son, the Lord Jesus. For the Christian the most amazing experience is still future. One day, probably sooner than we imagine, the Lord Jesus is going to "rapture" or "catch away" all those who have believed on Him. The bodies of those believers who have died will be raised from the dead; those of us who are alive will be caught up together with them and we will meet the Lord in the air. This is described for us in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. But as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:51: "We shall all be changed" Elsewhere the Apostle John writes, "We know that, when He (the Lord Jesus) shall appear, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is." 1 John 3:2.

The challenge for you and me therefore must be: If God intends that ultimately we will be conformed to the image of His Son by an act of majestic power, should we not be concerned today and every day to be like Jesus now?

To finish can I quote the words of a well known hymn that returns to the theme of the potter and the clay:

*"Have Thine own way, Lord, have Thine own way.
Thou art the potter, I am the clay;
Mould me and make me after Thy will,
While I am waiting, yielded and still.*

*Have Thine own way Lord, have Thine own way.
Hold o'er my being absolute sway;
Fill with Thy Spirit till all shall see
Christ only, always, living in me".*

What a tremendous ambition to have! To be so moulded and shaped by God that what others see is "Christ only, always, living in me".

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