

From Discouragement to Growth Unexpected Setbacks

*[Please note: sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
The New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Hello, and welcome to the latest in our series of talks entitled “From discouragement to growth”, and today we are looking at “Unexpected setbacks.” There is a very well-known saying that applies as we think about this topic, and it is absolutely true, that is that everything that ever happens to us will either make us better or bitter and the choice is ours. It is very easy to blame our surroundings, events, actions of others, setbacks, and many other things as reasons why we act, feel, or think in a particular way which is often far from positive and desirable. A valid question that we all need to challenge ourselves with is, - are we reactors or actors?

Now, I am not saying that we should be constantly going around acting in a way that is not true of us, trying to be someone else as the very nature of being an actor is. However, more damaging potentially, is simply going about day to day reacting to people and circumstances in any way that comes to us naturally. We can see the results of this all around us, road rage, domestic violence, infidelity, street fights, etc. How many of these things are caused by an improper reaction to what has been said or happened? The Bible is full of instructions to us in regard to being mindful of what we think about, what we say, and how we act.

One of the main reasons that unexpected circumstances can be such a big problem to us is that we have become filled with our own sense of importance and therefore expect to be in control of everything, all of the time. The western world has very much turned its back on the thought of God and thrown aside His Word and adopted the attitude that we can sort things out ourselves. The complete opposite to this attitude is the person who is completely surrendered to the will of God having become utterly convinced of their own weakness and ability to do anything in their own strength. A good example of this would be the Apostle Paul and I would like to begin our consideration of this subject taking him as an example.

Paul was known as Saul of Tarsus before his conversion to Christ and he was a powerful, ambitious, determined, and deeply religious man who was committed to stamping out Christianity. We first read of him in Acts chapter 7, and I would like to read verse 58, this refers to the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. I will be reading from the NKJV as will all future readings unless otherwise stated.

“And they cast him [that is, Stephen] out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.”

Then in chapter 8 we read at the start of verse 1,

“Now Saul was consenting to his death.”

In the very next chapter we then read in verses 1 and 2;-

“Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.”

So Saul was a very uncompromising young man who was not to be messed with and yet as we read on in Acts chapter 9, we read that on that very journey to Damascus, the Lord appeared to him, threw him to the ground, caused him to be blinded, and changed his life completely. I want to bring this to your attention as after his conversion the Apostle Paul went on to write, as directed by the Holy Spirit, a great deal about what our attitude and subsequent actions should be in spite of the circumstances that come our way. Before we think about these verses it is also worth noticing that the fierceness of Saul of Tarsus had gone very quickly and an entirely new character was being presented as the Apostle Paul, we read this in his first epistle to the Thessalonians chapter 2 verse 7:

“But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children.”

What lessons therefore would the Scriptures bring to us from the experiences of this changed man, the Apostle Paul? I firstly want to read from his epistle to the Philippians chapter 4 verses 11 to 13:

“Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned 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.”

It is absolutely clear that the various things that happened to Paul were the training ground that made him to realise that Christ was the answer to all his problems and that through Him he would be able to triumph in his life, and be a witness to those around him at the time, and for all of us who come after him. It is a very rewarding thing to set your mind to train for something and then be able to accomplish that feat, whether running a marathon or climbing a mountain or whatever. How much greater and more rewarding it is when we can see the events of life, whether pleasing or painful, as a training ground to make us more like Christ while we are still on this earth in preparation for the day when we will be with Him and like Him for ever in heaven. It is a powerful thing to see an elderly Christian knowing that their earthly life is about to come to an end and able to look back over a long life and recognise how the Lord has been present, directing and sustaining them, through all of life's ups and downs.

In the earlier verses of Chapter 4 of Philippians Paul has already given us some guidance as to what we should be aiming for in the training ground of life. I would like to read verses 4 and 5:

“Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I will say, Rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand.”

That gentleness that we have just read about which was evident to the Thessalonians was also to be evident in the lives of the Philippians. I like to think about the Philippian jailer who not so very long before had beaten Paul and Silas and was about to kill himself when he thought the prisoners had escaped, now sitting in the company as Paul's letter to them was read out! Then verse 8 gives very practical guidance on what we should do to control our feelings and actions. After telling them not to be anxious for anything we read this in verses 8 and 9:

“Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy - meditate on these things. The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you.”

The older I get the more I realise the power that these words have in being able to accept and deal with in a positive manner all that comes our way in day-to-day lives. One thing that is absolutely certain is that life will not always turn out as we expect or wish it to and by always having these verses before us, as Paul says meditating upon them, they will help us do just that.

What we are seeing here is that our thoughts should determine how we feel and not the other way around. I mentioned earlier that we have a choice as to how we react to every circumstance of life, however, this can only be done positively if we are controlling our thoughts in respect of these situations, for our feelings will not always take us in the right direction. Our feelings can sometimes be very dangerous, and they are often used as an excuse for actions that are not desirable, at best, or even sinful at worst. The culture of the world would say that we should be able to do whatever our feelings desire as long as they are not hurting anyone else! This is at complete odds with what God desires from us, He wants to see and takes pleasure in a holy and righteous life lived with Him and other people as our prerogative and not ourselves. Again we can see this in Paul's writings, I would like to read Romans chapter 12 verse 2:

“And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”

Again, then here we have that responsibility for our mind. To be conformed to something requires doing nothing, like a jelly filling the mould it will conform to the shape of the mould. Being transformed is completely different, that is a far more active thing, and we must work to renew our minds to achieve it. It is important though to keep in mind here that Paul is talking to Christians. Those who have accepted Christ as their own Saviour, having realised that they cannot do anything of themselves to have their sins dealt with and their sin covered. This forgiveness and salvation cannot simply come from renewing our minds and thinking about these positive things we have been talking about. These are things which need to be done day by day by the believer in order to work out in our lives what has already taken place when we were born again.

I now would like to look at some verses in the epistle of James that may also help us deal with unexpected setbacks. I would like to read from James chapter 4, verses 13 to 16:

“Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit”; whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour that appears for a little time then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.” But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.”

These verses, I always think, are sobering and challenging but at the same time very encouraging. They are encouraging as they remind us that God holds our very existence in His hands. The creator God who knows the end from the beginning desires that we entrust Him with our lives and to accept that He has everything in His control. Surely this is far more comforting than the atheist view that everything that happens to us is down to random chance, whether good or bad. Pure fate is not something I want to build my life upon. It is sobering as well as it reminds us that in the

great span of eternity our lives, even the very longest of them, are no more than a vapour. Every time I boil the kettle and I watch the steam disappear I think about this verse and the implications of it. What am I doing with “my vapour?” The challenge of them also comes in respect of how often, if you are anything like me, we make plans as if we are the sole director of our own lives with no, or at least, very little reference to God. I have no doubt that if we were more mindful of this day by day, then perhaps circumstances of life may not be seen as “unexpected” or “setbacks” but simply God’s sovereign will for our brief journey on this earth.

It is important to note that James is not saying we should not make plans for our lives, but rather that we should make these plans in the full knowledge that God may have different ones. We can see numerous times in the Acts of the Apostles where plans were changed as directed by the Holy Spirit and to be mindful of this is a tremendous practical expression of what Paul writes in his first epistle to the Corinthians chapter 6 verses 19 and 20:

“Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore, glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s.”

What a statement that is, “we are not our own” and we need to be constantly seeking God’s help and wisdom to live our lives in the full expression of this. Surely the enormous price that was paid to redeem us and purchase us for God should also motivate and inspire us to live in the good of it.

We have thought a great deal about the writings and experiences of the apostles Paul and James, but I now want to think a little about a well-known character in the Old Testament who faced great unexpected setbacks in life and triumphed through them all, that is Job. We read the following in chapter 1 of the Book of Job and verse 1:

“There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil.”

Straight away we are given a wonderful testimony of who Job was and of his priorities in life and this sets the scene as to why he was able to deal with the setbacks that came his way and really turn disappointments to growth. Before we think about these things in particular, I do want to mention in general that chapter 1 of Job goes on to explain things which are beyond the scope of this talk where after some dialogue between God and Satan, Satan is allowed of God to test Job in any way he wants apart from taking his life. Satan having already fallen himself and taken fallen angels with him and off course, caused the fall of Adam and Eve was now contesting with God that a person would only follow God while the blessings of life were going his way. God therefore allowed Satan to test Job to prove that the exact opposite was true and also to reveal His goodness toward the believer in the very darkest of circumstances. God asked Satan if he had considered His servant Job and Satan more or less replies by saying that things would be different if his life started to go wrong. In verse 11 Satan says that Job would curse God to His face if things were taken from him, how wrong he turned out to be. Sadly, however, this is the case with many people who feel they cannot even recognise a sovereign God because of the bad things that happen in life. It is a challenge however as we all need to be reminded that irrespective of the things that happen, God is good.

We often see that when prayers have been answered in what we see as a positive manner, someone can comment that God is good. Which is true, He is but even if the answer had been negative or there had been no obvious answer to prayer at all He would still be good, it is part of His character. So it is with these thoughts in mind that we can think about what happened to Job and how he responded to it.

As we read further down chapter 1 of the Book of Job, we learn that Job had seven sons and three daughters, as well as flocks and herds of many animals and the end of verse 3 tells us that he was the greatest of all the people of the East. Quite an accolade and then disaster strikes, in verses 13 to 19 we read of various events that resulted in his sons and daughters being killed and of him losing all his possessions. Verse 20 tells us that he tore his clothes, shaved his head, fell to the ground and worshipped. What an incredible response! We could be forgiven for expecting the Scripture to say he lamented instead of worshipping! Yet, this is the first indication of how Job was going to deal with these unexpected setbacks. It is therefore essential for us to read verse 21:

“And he said: Naked I came from my mother’s womb,
And naked shall I return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD
has taken away; Blessed be the name of the LORD.”

Then in chapter 2 when it would seem things could not get any worse for Job, and in similar circumstances to chapter 1, Satan is allowed to attack his health and he becomes covered in painful boils from the sole of his foot to the top of his head. This is the start of a whole series of health problems right up until chapter 33. These included lost appetite, agonizing discomfort, insomnia, worm infestation of his flesh, hallucinations, decaying skin, severe halitosis, teeth falling out, raging fever and dramatic weight loss. In such awful circumstances he needed the help and support of those of his nearest and dearest but even that did not happen for Job. In verse 9 we read:

“Then his wife said to him, “Do you still hold fast to your integrity? Curse God and die!”

Surely now this would break even such a strong character and a man of God! But no. We all tend to put a lot of emphasis on the advice and guidance of our wives and husbands and our closest and most trusted friends. This is a valuable and important thing to do but we must always be careful to ensure that the advice is sound and based on Scripture, not just on someone’s feelings or even their interpretation of Scripture. Job does this and his response to his wife is quite astounding, we will read Job chapter 2 verse 10:

“But he said to her, “You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. Shall we indeed accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity?” In all this Job did not sin with his lips.”

Job then has three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, who come to comfort him, but they do anything but. Although they are well intentioned, they contribute to Job going on a roller-coaster of emotions. We still refer to them to this day as “Job’s comforters” and it should be something we ourselves always keep in mind when we speak to those who are going through particular difficulties and prayerfully ensure our words are not making their situation worse. However, in spite of Job’s severe trials and the unhelpful words of his friends, his responses to them are quite incredible and show tremendous wisdom. Perhaps one of the most notable is in chapter 9 verse 12 where he says of God:

“If He takes away, who can hinder Him? Who can say to Him,
‘What are you doing?’”

There are many other things that happened to Job and lessons we can learn from him, but I just want to take us right to the end of his life. After God had restored everything to him that he had lost we see in chapter 42 verse 12 that the LORD blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning and the very last words of the book tell us that Job died, old and full of days. Job’s faithfulness throughout all these difficulties resulted in a return of his earthly blessings and while that may not be the situation for us today, we can be confident that our heavenly blessings which

Christ has won for us cannot be taken away by these any of these setbacks of life however challenging they may be at the time.

I trust these few thoughts will be a blessing to us all as we face the very real and often difficult challenges of life that come our way.

Thank you for listening to this talk today, number T1352, Unexpected setbacks.

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