

LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for September 30: Living through trials

September 20, 2012

It is the age-old, universally asked question: Why do bad things happen to good people? Especially within the church, many believe once a person becomes a follower of Christ, God should and will remove all trials and difficulties.

Life teaches us that simply is not the case. Often the trials we face are due to the circumstances of life, but occasionally, we must deal with difficulties brought on us by the unjust treatment of others. When these trying times come, our first reaction is to cry out to God wanting to know why or how long we must endure, and calling on God to remove the difficulty.

While such a response is valid, in all these instances, the most significant question is not why or for how long we will face trials, but how will we act in response to them.

Peter's original audience certainly understood unjust treatment as they experienced physical persecution for their beliefs. In his efforts to encourage these suffering believers, he addressed the issue of how they should respond and in doing so, assists all who must live through trials.

Submit your rights (1 Peter 2:18-20)

In verse 18, Peter specifically addresses his comments to those living as slaves. We must be careful to avoid associating images from our own history with the image of a slave Peter mentions. These often were individuals who agreed to work for another in order to pay off a debt.

Others were perhaps poor and had bound themselves to work for another in exchange for shelter.

Thus while we may not be in the position of a “slave,” we all live in at least one relationship with someone who has authority over us. Within those relationships, whenever we feel mistreated, our natural tendency is to demand our rights even if legal action must be taken.

Peter states that when we are mistreated, we should suppress this tendency and submit our rights. This is the same instruction Jesus gave in Matthew 5 when he spoke of turning the other cheek and going the second mile. These things are not obligations, but should be done as we demonstrate our love of our neighbors, even those neighbors who mistreat us.

In verse 19, Peter wrote this submission of the demand for our rights should be because we are conscious of God’s presence. Such a continuous awareness helps us to always properly respond to our changing circumstances rather than emotionally react to perceived injustice. God’s presence assures us God takes notice of those who endure suffering while doing good.

Follow Christ’s example (1 Peter 2:21-23)

When we react to mistreatment by returning the same action or seeking revenge, it may be legal, vindicating and even somewhat cathartic, but it does not reflect the character of the one who has called us to live a life distinct from the world.

Peter here reminds us that the life of a follower of Christ is a life that will face trials and persecution. We should not be surprised when the world acts like the world in opposing Christ’s followers since it opposed him. Jesus told us his followers would encounter tribulations in this world because of him (John 16:33).

Jesus also provided us with the example of how we should respond to those trials. He did not give in to the human desire to strike back. He did not return verbal or physical attacks with threats or words anger or hate. He simply continued to love his persecutors and gave his life for them. It is when we follow that example that we most clearly fulfill our call to be light in the darkness of this world.

Depend on God's strength (1 Peter 2:24-25)

When we seek to overcome adversity and mistreatment within our own strength, we fail. We may be able to summon the will power for a while, but eventually the natural tendency to demand our rights or to even the scales takes over.

Peter reminds us we have a power available to us that already has overcome even our greatest enemy, the grave. He reminds us it is in the wounds Jesus endured that we find healing and the strength to overcome. Then as we endure and bear the marks inflicted by our trials, others see the power of God at work through us.

Adoniram Judson, the great 19th century missionary to Burma, experienced tremendous mistreatment during 17 months in prison. As a result, he bore large scars from the chains and shackles for the rest of his life. Upon his release, the ruler denied his request to continue his work in another province saying, "My people are not foolish enough to listen to what a missionary might say, but I fear they might be impressed by your scars and turn to your religion."

Bad things will happen to God's people. When they do, we have a choice to make about how we will respond. We can focus on the trial and demand our rights in the face of what we perceive as undeserved persecution, or we can refuse to give in to our natural tendency by submitting our will and desires to following Christ's example through the power he gives. It is only

when we choose the latter that we please God and find victory over our trials.