

## MYTH: *Christian Life is Easier* • 2 Corinthians 4:16-18

I watched the preacher on television. He was passionate and articulate. He said that God wants everyone to be healthy and wealthy. He told us that God has promised the good life to all Christians if we will only claim the promises of God. He went on to say that it is a lie from the devil that we can't have all of our problems solved. And he asked us in his listening audience to take a step of faith and to prove God by sending a large donation to him and then by sitting back and watching how God would bless.

The underlying promise to everything he said seemed to me to be that life is easier when a person becomes a Christian. In some ways that's true; in other ways it is quite contrary to what the Bible teaches. After all, Jesus said in Matthew 11:30, "For my yolk is easy and my burden is light." Jesus promised in Matthew 28:20, ". . . I am with you always, to the very end of the age." And God tells us in Hebrews 13:5, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."

As a pastor I have had people share with me their great disappointment with God because they thought he promised them better than they got in life. When they became followers of Jesus their understanding was that he would answer all their prayers, solve all their problems, heal all their diseases and make life constantly happy. Then came sickness, sadness and set backs that really hurt and took them by surprise. It is not what they thought the Christian life would be like.

We must beware of the myth that the Christian life is always easy. It is not.

Oh, please don't misunderstand. The Christian life is wonderful. The Christian life is supernatural. The Christian life is spectacular. But it is not easy. So, I invite you to three biblical teachings and lots of biblical quotations to try to put all of this into perspective.

The first biblical teaching is universal human suffering. St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:13, "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man." That is to say that there are troubles

in life that are part of the universal human experience. It is part of living in our world and no one is exempt. All of humanity must deal with it.

The list is long—fire; floods; famine; earthquakes; crimes; broken bones; broken hearts; disease; death. It is not that everyone experiences all of them, but as Christians we are not exempt from any of them. When someone becomes a Christian she is not suddenly immune from the flu at school or getting fired at work. Christians are as vulnerable to natural disasters, mental illness, financial losses and family problems as anyone else.

St. Paul is the Poster Christian for universal human suffering. We read just a bit of his autobiography in 2 Corinthians 11:24-27:

*Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in*

*the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.*

In the next chapter he talks about his "thorn in the flesh" from which he

repeatedly prayed to be healed and was declined every time. He never says what his physical disability was, but Bible students have guessed that it was either poor vision or chronic malaria. Either way, the great apostle wasn't exempt from physical problems just because he was a Christian.

Please don't think that because of faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior we are somehow immunized against the difficulties of life. The difference is not in what happens to us but in how we respond to what happens to us.

***We should consider it a privilege to belong to Jesus Christ whether life is easy or hard.***

All of this may seem terribly discouraging. But don't get discouraged. Just listen and hang in there for awhile. What we're talking about here will get better; but first it will get worse!

The second biblical teaching is that there is often extra suffering for Christians. That's right! Many times Christians actually have more problems and greater suffering simply because we are Christians. 1 Peter 4:12 tells us, "*Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.*"

In the first century Christians knew that they were at greater risk because of their faith. Christians were enslaved, persecuted and even tortured and killed. Let me give you a sampling of what the New Testament was telling those first century Christians about the hardships of being a follower of Jesus:

*Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.* (Hebrews 10:32-34)

*This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal.* (2 Timothy 2:8)

Jesus' brother writes, "*Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.*" (James 1:2-3)

*Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.* (Hebrews 12:2-3)

*You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.*

(1 Thessalonians 1:6)

*Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.* (2 Corinthians 8:2)

*Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger.* (2 Corinthians 6:4-5)

*We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardship we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life.* (2 Corinthians 1:8)

Well, you get the point. It can be tough to be a Christian. Although, probably a lot less tough for us than for many. We live in a country with freedom of faith and are not likely to experience a fraction of what Christians suffered in the Roman Empire or even now in the Sudan or North Korea or other parts of our modern world.

None of us wants tough times, but we should not be surprised by them. To the contrary, we should consider it a privilege to belong to Jesus Christ whether life is easy or hard.

A few years ago Charleen and I retraced at least part of the journey of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Antarctic explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton. We sailed the Weddell Sea, walked on South Georgia Island, visited Elephant Island and toured around parts of Antarctica. Maybe you know his story.

In 1914 Ernest Shackleton sailed from England with a 27-member crew aboard the ship the Endurance, headed for the largely unexplored continent of Antarctica. His biographers tell about an ad he ran in a London newspaper in anticipation of his expedition. It said:

**MEN WANTED FOR HAZARDOUS JOURNEY. LOW WAGES, BITTER COLD, LONG HOURS OF COMPLETE DARKNESS. SAFE RETURN DOUBTFUL. HONOUR AND RECOGNITION IN EVENT OF SUCCESS.**

Five thousand men volunteered to go.

It is a metaphor for following Jesus. Far more so than signing up with Shackleton, becoming a Christian and following Jesus Christ as Lord is a great adventure with God. It is exhilarating, promising and spectacular, but there are probable, if not inevitable, hardships along the way. And billions have volunteered.

The Christian life is very good but do not be surprised if it is also very hard. We are told in 1 Peter 4:12, "*Dear friends, do not be sur-*

*prised at the painful trial that you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.”*

The third biblical teaching is about the special grace God gives Christians. Recognizing the difficulties of life God promises special provisions for followers of Jesus. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18:

*Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*

Paul’s point here is that the troubles of life are of a short duration in comparison to the length of eternity. Some day earth’s troubles will pass and Christians will experience the wonder of heaven when today’s troubles will be forgotten.

As good as a future promise may be it may not be enough to deal with present pain. So, the Bible gives an added perspective that only Christians can understand in 1 Peter 4:12-16:

*Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.*

The point here is that Jesus suffered for us. He was humiliated, beaten and crucified to redeem us from sin. He is our Savior and Leader. We have signed up with him and it is an honor to experience

for him a little of what he experienced for us.

When life gets hard we not only identify with Jesus but we gain insight that helps us to help others. Have you ever gone to a counselor or physician and discovered that she or he once suffered what you are suffering? 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 says:

*Praise be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.*

So, here is what happens. As Christians our lives are not always easy. We experience the same universal problems of life that everyone else experiences. We may even suffer extra pain and problems just because we are followers of Jesus. But when

we do, God steps in and provides supernatural love, care, promise and strength. We get to experience God in new and deeper ways because of the problems of life.

Do you remember that physical disability of Paul? Whether it was poor vision or chronic malaria or whatever it was, here was his response in 2 Corinthians 12:8-10:

*Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

It is not that Christians have lives that are easier. It is that Christians have a God who is greater!

In December 1914 the Endurance entered the ice fields of the Weddell Sea. The pack ice froze around them and the promises of the ad started to come true: HAZARDOUS JOURNEY. LOW WAGES, BITTER COLD, LONG HOURS OF COMPLETE DARKNESS. SAFE RETURN DOUBTFUL.

***It is not that Christians have lives that are easier. It is that Christians have a God who is greater!***

They stayed in and around their ice-locked ship for ten months, through the darkness of the Antarctic winter, hoping they would be able to survive the winter and finally be able to sail to the open sea. But tragedy was added to tragedy on one indescribable day when the ice crushed the *Endurance*. No one knew where they were. There was no help coming. So Shackleton and his twenty-seven men started walking across the frozen sea, dragging three lifeboats and minimal supplies. Eventually they reached open water and floated to Elephant Island. It seemed hopeless. Between them and South America was the Drake Passage with the roughest seas in the world. They knew their chance of survival in lifeboats was absolutely zero.

So, Shackleton and four crew members took one of the lifeboats and headed away from South America toward South Georgia Island where there was a whaling station. Without adequate navigation equipment and with dead reckoning they aimed for a speck in the Southern Atlantic Ocean that was 800 miles away. Bitter cold and dangerous waters surrounded them. They were the only hope for the 23 men left behind on Elephant Island. Shackleton was a committed Christian. He prayed for God's grace and God got them to South Georgia Island.

Amazingly, in one of the greatest feats of navigation in all of human history, they hit it! But they landed on the wrong side. Between them and the whaling station was a mountain range so high and dangerous it had never been conquered by humans. Without experience or proper climbing equipment Shackleton and two of his men headed up the mountains and over ice fields, through blizzards and over treacherous cliffs. Thirty-six hours later they slid down the other side of the moun-

tain to the whaling station. Here's what Ernest Shackleton wrote in his diary:

"I know that during that long and racking march of 36 hours over the unnamed mountains of South Georgia, it seemed to me often that there were four, not three. I said nothing to my companions, but afterwards Worsley said to me, 'Boss, I had a curious feeling that there was another person with us.' "

You see, God did not preserve them from severe difficulty. What God did was climb the mountain with them.

They reached the whaling station and led those whalers back 800 miles to the Antarctic Peninsula and Elephant Island where the other twenty-three crew members were marooned—and rescued them all. Not one was lost. Ernest Shackleton returned all 27 members of his crew safely to London.

God has not promised us a life of ease. What he has promised us is himself . . . and grace that is sufficient for any mountain we will ever be called to climb.

And so, God, give that grace to us now, we ask. In the midst of our own challenges and difficulties may we not only be faithful to you but may we experience your faithfulness to us in amazing and supernatural ways.

All this we pray through Jesus Christ—our Boss.

Amen.

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