



Affliction

by Mark Brunner

By The Handle and Not The Blade! (Acts 7:60)

Recently my wife was called away on an emergency and had left a frozen packages of beef stew meat on the counter with instructions for preparation. Happy to oblige, I reached for the large knife that we most often use to pare meat and the paring began. Since the stew would cook more quickly if the pieces of meat were smaller, I was careful with my cuts until, plop, one errant piece of beef ended up on the floor beside my foot. Mindful that the dogs would be on that in but a few seconds, I quickly dropped my knife and grabbed the meat. Meat rescued, I began to reach for the knife even before my eyes had left the gaze of the hungry wiener dog prowling at my feet. Suddenly I was gripped with instant pain. In my hurry to regain my cutting rhythm, I had grabbed the knife by the blade and not the handle. What had felt so comfortable to me but moments before, now felt extremely uncomfortable. I would have been better off sacrificing the piece of meat.

Affliction in our lives is like that knife; it either serves us or cuts us depending upon how we choose to grasp it—by the blade or the handle. It really is a matter of perspective. This verse of poetic prose really gives us a good idea of what I mean. “My life is but a weaving between my Lord and me. I cannot choose the

colors, He does so steadily. Oft times He weaves in sorrow and I in foolish pride, forget He sees the upper and I the underside. Not till the loom is silent and the shuttle ceases to fly, shall God unroll the canvas and explain the reason why. (Source Unknown.)

When bad things happen to good people, it's easy to feel the sharp side of the hurt, isn't it? Yet, when we keep the hurt and the pain in perspective, hold it by the handle and not the blade as it were, the sting is not apparent, only the opportunity. Many early Christians were glad to suffer for the sake of Christ. They held the knife by the handle and not the blade. Each of us should learn that lesson well. God knows best the path we need to take in this life and often that path may lead through a place of pain or sorrow. He sees the whole picture and we see but a glimpse. The blessing lies in the fact that someday it will all make sense; if only we have the patience to hold the hurt by the handle and not the blade.

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Good Intentions Not Good Enough! (Mark 8:32-33)

I've been meaning to lose weight--for a long time, that is. I'm also finding out that losing weight was a lot easier when I was younger and more active. For that reason, I've have come to an awareness that the inch I pinched when I was young that threw me into a panic of weight-lifting and jogging, doesn't have the same effect in my middle age. I've grown to accept some flabbiness as just part of who I am; a middle-aged man with bad knees and good intentions.

But, what about spiritual flabbiness? Is this something that we should also be willing to relegate to the inevitable? Are “flabby” Christians of any use to God?

On December 29, 1987, a Soviet cosmonaut returned to the earth after 326 days in orbit. He was in good health, which hasn't always been the case in those record-breaking voyages. Five years earlier, touching down after 211 days in space, two cosmonauts suffered from dizziness, high pulse rates, and heart palpitations. They couldn't walk for a week, and after 30 days, they were still

undergoing therapy for atrophied muscles and weakened hearts. At zero gravity, the muscles of the body begin to waste away because there is no resistance. To counteract this, the Soviets prescribed a vigorous exercise program for the cosmonauts. They invented the “penguin suit,” a running suit laced with elastic bands. It resists every move the cosmonauts make, forcing them to exert their strength. Apparently the regimen is working. (Craig Brian Larson.)

The fact of the matter is, a life of pleasure without suffering will ultimately make us flabby and weak from a spiritual perspective. As we long dreamily for days without difficulty, God has a very different plan in mind. He knows that the easier our life, the weaker our spiritual fiber and that strength of any kind grows only by exertion. The Christian road of life is not a paved road to wealth and the easy life. There’s hard work, disappointment and, yes, pain and sorrow along the way. This is God’s plan for us to endure. We need to suit up each day and willingly undergo God’s spiritual exercise that often includes a good workout of affliction. This is one intention that we really need to put into action.

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Bumpy Hills! (1 Peter 4:1)

How far will you go to avoid pain? Everyday we do little things to get around pain and its consequences. We handle a piece of rough wood with our hands and we put on a pair of gloves to avoid splinters. We avoid the pain. That makes common sense. But, if we were to approach life from that footing, that everything we did or felt had to be insulated from pain, wouldn’t each of us be one huge walking bandage from foot to toe?

When painful things happen in our lives, we usually want God to do a removing job; to keep us safe from the pain. Like a little child we look up to Him and ask, “Will it hurt?” Oftentimes when the answer is “Yes,” our reaction is sorrow, not joy that God Himself is there supervising the hurt.

Is there a side to pain that is good? Could God be actively using that pain to bring about something good in us? Or, is pain just one more consequence of sin and we'll just have to grin and bear it?

A small girl had been promised the privilege of climbing to a nearby hilltop where her brother enjoyed playing. But when she came within sight of the steep, rough path, she drew back in dismay. "Why, there isn't a smooth spot any- where. It's all bumpy and stony!" she exclaimed. "Yes," said her more experienced older brother, "but how else would we ever climb to the top if it wasn't? The stones and bumps are what we step on to get there." (Source Unknown.)

When painful things happen in our lives, rather than asking God to do a removing job, perhaps we need to be looking to Him to do an improving job. It is often said "To realize the worth of the anchor, it must feel the storm." As followers of Christ we should look upon pain as a possibility, not merely a hardship. When we are so disposed to suffer, there is a foothold to faith that lies before us. Our task is to step upon it and rise above the pain and find the joy of hope in Christ.

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Never Cause To Run! (Job 21:22)

I was watching a dog-training show the other day on television where the dog owner was completely baffled by his dog's reaction to running water. All he had to do was to reach for the faucet and turn it just a bit and the dog, tail between its legs, would scoot for the nearest hiding place. What it perceived as pain and suffering, however irrationally, was, in fact, a blessing. But, it was a blessing that it simply didn't want to wait around and discover.

How helpless and confused we must look to God when, confronted by the prospect of disappointment or pain, we hightail it and run away. Like the dog afraid of the very thing that might give it comfort, we react irrationally when confronted with the prospect of something that we perceive as an affliction.

We head in the other direction, not even willing to discover what might have been a blessing in the first place.

A funny thing happened in Darlington, Maryland, several years ago. Edith, a mother of eight, was coming home from a neighbor's house one Saturday afternoon. Things seemed too quiet as she walked across her front yard. Curious, she peered through the screen door and saw five of her youngest children huddled together, concentrating on something. As she crept closer to them, trying to discover the center of attention, she could not believe her eyes. Smack dab in the middle of the circle were five baby skunks. Edith screamed at the top of her voice, "Quick, children...run!" Each kid grabbed a skunk and ran. (Swindoll, *The Quest for Character*, Multnomah, p. 192)

Oh that we might be so smart when confronted by affliction. When we see our afflictions as something to run away from, often we leave behind the one thing that can help us the most, the very thing that is causing the pain. Perhaps if we vowed to carry it for awhile and see what it might do for us, we might not be so quick to run from it. After awhile, if it hasn't knocked us down yet, what would be the purpose of running from it. That might be the perfect time to pick it up and learn from it. We may be baffled by affliction, but if we trust that God is in control, there is never cause to run.

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Bigger Than Life! (Philippians 1:29)

Most of the time the things that afflict us in this life are pretty static. There's that aching pain in our knee or the boss who bugs us and we just can't seem to overcome the resentment. But then there's the larger afflictions, the ones that are real-ly unjust. They grow with time and become great burdens. It's hard to deflect these because they seem so insurmountable, so unjust. What is God's will for us in times of these major afflictions?

The little things can be endured. But, the big things, those major surgeries or the loss of a loved one, really push the limits of our ability to endure. How does God want us to react to the really big, unfair things in life?

In 1924, two climbers were part of an expedition that set out to conquer Mount Everest. As far as is known, they never reached the summit; and they never returned. Somewhere on that gigantic mountain they were overpowered by the elements and died. After the failure of the expedition, the rest of the party returned home. Addressing a meeting in London, one of those who returned described the ill-fated adventure. He then turned to a huge photograph of Mount Everest, mounted on the wall behind him. “Everest,” he cried, “we tried to conquer you once, but you overpowered us. We tried to conquer you a second time, but again you were too much for us. But, Everest, I want you to know that we are going to conquer you, for you can’t grow any bigger, and we can!” (Gene Getz, *Doing Your Part*, Regal, 1984, pp. 152-3.)

When you think about it, the big afflictions, those that catch us unaware and seem so unjust because we really don’t feel we earned the pain and the suffering, don’t get any bigger over time. Even the loss of life can’t grow bigger than the limits God has set upon it. Every problem in life, even the ones as big as Mount Everest, has its limits. They have been so set by a just and merciful God. When we determine that it is not our burden to suffer but rather our privilege to do so for the sake of Jesus Christ, there is no affliction that can match our ability to grow in grace and obedience beyond it. In affliction a Christian overshadows the pain and the suffering because Christ is in us and He is bigger than life.

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No Free Lunch? (Psalm 12:11)

We received one of those promotions in the mail the other day. You know, “Make no investment now. Simply write for this free kit and we’ll show you how to make a fortune by simply doing nothing.” I believe the offer had something to do with buying and selling properties. Usually I throw these things away without even opening them. But, whether it was just a sense of curiosity or, deep down, I was really hoping it would be true, I slipped my finger under the seal and opened it. I read through the promotion and quickly discovered that my “free lunch” had a price tag. The “educational” materials that went with the “kit” were pricey. The odds of making money were slim or none. Lunch wouldn’t be free.

If we’re looking for happiness in this life, is it right to want things we don’t have?

Here’s a thought from Ivy Bozeman: “A whale had followed a delectable small fish called a Capelin into a nearby inlet. The lighthouse keeper told us that he was “beached” in shallow water for now. Our tour group stood watching the poor whale as he struggled in the shallow water, wondering what would happen if he didn’t find his way back out into the deeper waters of the Atlantic. The shallow water of the inlet wasn’t his natural home. Life was far from complete near the shore. In the deep waters of the Atlantic Ocean, the whale had been free, but the desire for the glittering and tasteful little fish had led him astray. The whale’s predicament reminded me of times in my life when I’d followed something that seemed extremely important at the time, and later, I found that I was trapped.” (Ivy Bozeman)

How many times do Christians follow personal desires that lead them into shallow places, and then feel that God has abandoned them? It’s not intentional. Like the whale, we’re caught up in the moment. Sometimes we follow the shining and tasty things of this world and lose sight of the real abundance God has promised us within the safe confines of his love. And, before we know it, we find ourselves floundering in the shallows of temporary pleasures. A good rule of thumb is if it seems too good, it probably is. Life in abundance is waiting for us if only we’re willing to wait on God to deliver it in His time and within His purposes. There is a free lunch, but only God knows how and when to serve it.

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