

08/21/11

Living Life Together When Times are Hard

- Would you agree with me that the times we're living in are hard?...
 - that's not to say that we don't have plenty of blessings because we do...
 - and certainly others have had, and do have it far harder than we do it...
 - but still, these are some challenging times...
- for example, the gridlock in our political system can be overwhelming...
 - and while that's probably always been true to some degree in our country's political system,
 - and in some senses it was designed to work that way...
 - still, the tone and polarization make you wonder if even problems that our government should legitimately try to address could ever be solved in the current political environment...
 - and over time that shrill rhetoric and non-stop political bickering is draining and discouraging...
- then there's obviously the economic hardship occurring around the world...
 - stubbornly high unemployment...
 - massive amounts of public and private debt...
 - high unemployment...retirement fund losses...
 - for some of us, these are the worst protracted economic conditions we've ever seen...
- add to that the groaning of creation because of the curse of sin...
 - companies still facing the effects of the tsunami that hit Japan...
 - incredibly large wildfires in Arizona and historic drought in Texas...
 - storms like the one last Saturday night at the Fair that left our entire state in mourning
- there's a lot of reasons to objectively look around us and say – these are hard times...
- then you might even bring that closer to home and say...
 - there's all the challenges that come with the fall...
 - you went on-line and looked at all the assignments you'll have to complete for your classes this semester and you felt this weight of pressure settle on your shoulders...
 - or you think about everything you had wanted to get done this year and you see the months slipping away...
 - or you or a loved one is facing a stubborn personal or family problem that saps you of joy and energy day after day...
- there's nothing wrong with saying, even right here at church – we're facing hard times...
- now let me ask you this – Can God use times that are hard to accomplish His purposes?...and sometimes even more-so than when times are easy?
- another way of asking that is – is there any sense in which people are like corn stalks?...
 - having grown up in Gary, I am imminently qualified to make this comparison...
 - but I've been told by the farmers around us that corn needs the right amount of hot dry weather...because if it rains too much, the stalks won't have to reach down deep in the soil for moisture and then when the fall winds start blowing, they won't have the ability to stand up before the grain is harvested...
 - is there any sense in which people are like that...where God uses hard times to accomplish His purposes?---with that question in mind, please open your Bible to Acts chapter 8...page 98 of the back section of the Bible under the chair in front of you...
- we're studying the book of Acts as part of our theme this year of **Living Life Together**...
 - last week we left the early church in what appeared to be a fairly sad condition...

- in chapter 6, a problem had arisen---the Hellenistic Jews were complaining because their widows were being neglected in the daily administration of food...
- and that was understandable—there were already an estimated 20,000 people who were part of the church, and all of that happened very rapidly after the day of Pentecost...the organization involved must have been a massive undertaking...
- but the problem was solved beautifully...the apostles brought the congregation together, they specifically and succinctly identified the problem...then they focused their attention on finding a solution...which in that case was the institution of the office of deacon...
- then the congregation followed the leadership they were given and selected 7 men who met the qualifications for the new office and off they went...
- then the next chapter is a very crucial development in the logic of the book...because Acts 7 is all about the powerful ministry of one of the deacons...which illustrates the important point that the church is a place where everyone can make a difference, and should make a difference...
 - the apostles, or the pastors are the not the star performers who do the work of ministry while a larger group of people passively watches...
 - pastors equip the saints to do the work of ministry and when everyone understands their role on the team and is equipped for and fulfills their role on the team...significant ministry can be accomplished by everyone...
- however, there is often opposition...in Stephen's case, the response to his preaching was a group of people driving him out of the city and then stoning him...this is the beginning of the persecution of the church of Jesus Christ...
- and a casual observer or a cynic might say – well, this is going to be the end of the story...
 - Christ said that His apostles would receive the Holy Spirit and then they would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and the uttermost parts of the earth...
 - telling the whole world about the free gift of salvation and new life available to every person, everywhere who would repent and believe...
 - well, that mission flamed out pretty quickly...look how hard things are already...
 - please don't ever confuse hard...with bad...
 - or hard with...God's not at work...
- let's listen in...
 - **read 8:1-8**...(Phillip was also one of the first deacons)
 - I'm going to skip the portion about a man named Simon for sake of time...let's pick it up at verse 14...
 - **read 8:14-17**...
 - now there's more about Simon we don't have time to discuss...
 - let's see what happens next...
 - **read 8:25-40**...
- we're talking this morning about Living Life Together When Times are Hard...
- and with the time we have remaining, let's think about **3 truths to remember when challenges come.**

I. Hard Times Reveal the True Values of Your Heart.

- there's no question here about...

A. The significance of the challenge.

- **8:1 – On that day a great persecution began...**

- in other words, what happened to Stephen?...that wasn't the climax, that was the starting point...
- and this is exactly what Jesus had predicted...
 - **John 15:20 - If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you...**
 - **John 16:2 - ...an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God.**
- Luke goes on to report...
- **8:3 – But Saul *began* ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.**
- that word is not used anywhere else in the NT...but it is used in the Greek translation of the OT and other places outside Scripture to speak of a force destroying an entire city or a person being mangled by a wild beast...
- that is now what's happening to the church of Jesus Christ at the hands of this madman named Saul...we've have a lot more to say about him next week...because this is not the end of his story by any means...
- but notice at this point – he's not just entering these house churches and dragging out the men and throwing them in prison...but the women as well...
- I think it's fair to say that they were facing hard times...and please note...

B. The effect of the challenge.

1. Many were scattered.

- **v. 1 – they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria...**
- you can picture people literally running for their lives because of their faith in Christ...
- and understand, all they had to do was shut up and stop living for Christ...and then they could have stayed wherever they wanted to stay...but apparently that wasn't an option...which is the whole point...hard times reveal the true values of your heart...the passage also says...

2. The apostles remained at their post.

- **v. 1 – scattered...except the apostles...**
- now, please remember that Luke explained at the beginning of the gospel of Luke that he was simply functioning as a historian...
- he was giving his friend Theophilus the information he needed about Jesus Christ and His early followers with the hopes that his good friend would become a Christian..
- so Luke isn't making a statement of comparison between the apostles who stayed and the other disciples who fled...both groups had an important role to play and went to the position on the field that they believed God had for them at the time...
- so it's not like the apostles were more courageous because they stayed or the others were more missional because they left...there's nothing in Scripture to make us compare the actions of one group to the other...it's just to help us understand who is going where...
- so the issue isn't – where did they go?...the issue is, what did they do on the way?
- and the passage is really clear about that, isn't it?...

C. The response of God's people.

- **Acts 8:4 - Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word.**
- that's the key point...they didn't lay low...they didn't try to blend in...they weren't concerned about extending their life or playing it safe...

- and there's our principle yet again – hard times reveal the true values of your heart...
- and these men and women loved Christ so much...and loved the people who needed Christ so much...that they weren't going to let a little thing like persecution stop them from proclaiming the message...
- don't you love the logic of this simple yet powerful verse?...
- and what happens when we're not like this?...
- Paul Tripp wrote:

Why do we question the faithfulness of God? Why do we think we are enduring more than we can bear? Why do we look for any escape we can find? Why are we not comforted by the promises of God? The answer is idolatry. Any situation that threatens my heart's desire for the things of this world will seem unbearable to me. God will seem unkind for placing me in that situation, and his presence will offer me little comfort. (Paul Tripp, *Suffering: Eternity Makes a Difference*, p. 24)

- the evaluative question becomes pretty obvious, doesn't it...what are hard times revealing about the true values of your heart?...now, what can we learn as this story continues to unfold?...

II. God Wants You to Love and Reach People Unlike You.

- we mentioned earlier that what we're reading is...

A. Another fulfillment of Acts 1:8.

- **Acts 1:8 - but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.**
- anybody who questioned whether Jesus had the power or the authority to keep that promise only needs to read Acts chapter 8...here's this incredible promise being fulfilled right before our very eyes...
- but here's what I'm concerned we'll miss if we aren't careful to study these verses in light of their historical context...

B. Phillip's ministry to Samaria was a shocking development in the history of Christ's church.

- the Jews and Samaritans hated one another...
- the animosity went back nearly 1000 years when the nation of Israel was divided and the northern kingdom established a rival system of worship...
- then when they were conquered by Assyria in the early 700's BC, they assimilated all sorts of Pagan beliefs and practices into their lifestyle and mode of worship...
- in fact, here's quick OT summary of the way they lived... **2 Kings 17:33 - They feared the LORD and served their own gods according to the custom of the nations from among whom they had been carried away into exile.**
- in other words, they were considered to be theological and relational half-breeds...and by the time of Christ you cut the animosity between these groups with a knife...

- that's why Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan was so scandalous...
- but remember – this isn't just here as some kind of history lesson...
- right in the middle of hard times, this faithful deacon purposely went to the Samaritans and risked his life to preach the good news of Jesus Christ to them...
- these hard times revealed the values of his heart and he knew that God wanted him to love and to reach people dramatically unlike himself...
- well, what does God want us to do with all of this?

C. This development provides tremendous direction for us as we live life together.

- the tendency on the part of God's people if we're not thinking biblically and missionally during hard times is to hunker down...to circle the wagons...to only care about our security and our prosperity...
- it would be the polar opposite of what we're seeing in this text...viewing hard times through the lens of reaching Samaritans...those who would appear to be far away from Christ...
- let's make that as practical as we can...

1. Our efforts at Purdue

- this fall is going to be historic for our church...
- we're launching a capital campaign to encourage special giving over a three year period of time to secure a piece of ground and construct a student ministry center and biblical counseling center as close to campus as we can...
- we've been working toward that for a long time...and we're ready to go...
- and some people might say – but the economy is bad...maybe we should only care about ourselves...
 - maybe we shouldn't risk or stretch...
 - that's as not the approach of the early church and it's not the sentiment of our church family...
 - all of our pastors and deacons have already made a generous financial commitment for the next three years...and maybe people are doing that quietly with our Director of Development Arvid Olson right now...
- and if you say – aren't you concerned that people might fuss at you for leading us in this direction during these economic times?...
- actually, I would be concerned if I wasn't doing that...because I am very thankful that we have an Acts 8 kind of congregation...
 - and we'll never take that for granted...
 - but what we're hearing from people is – we have to get this going...
 - the hard times we're facing as a country are definitely impacting college students so let's capitalize on that and take the gospel to their doorstep while their hearts might be especially tender to the message...
 - we're not hunkering down – we're scattering...
 - sometimes you scatter your location...at other times you scatter your resources...

2. Faith Community Institute (FCI) and Wednesday Night Kids of Faith (WNKOF)

- I hope you're planning to participate in our Faith Community Institute Classes...
 - by participate I mean praying, attending, and inviting...
- there is a tremendous amount of uncertainty right now in our culture and our community...these are hard times...well, what do we do with that?...
 - are we going to let this text impact us?...
 - we let hard times reveal the true values of our hearts and we seize the opportunities for ministry that hard times uniquely provide...
- if you have children, I hope you'll plan to have them in our Wednesday Night Kids of Faith program...teach them to be missional.

3. Our ministry with the United Way

- this is not going to be a major emphasis this fall...but you have an insert in your bulletin about the upcoming United Way fund drive...
 - this is for people who do not have an opportunity to participate where you work...
 - you can watch a video explanation on our website if you would like more information than what I'm about to say...
 - but the bottom line is that the United Way helps to fund some great non-profit organizations in our town...
 - I know that from my work on the board of the Red Cross...about half of our funding comes from the United Way and what the Red Cross does meets significant needs in our town...
 - what's amazing to me is that churches in our community do not generally participate...
 - they do in other communities but not ours...
 - and we have trouble justifying that in light of passages like the two you see in the handout...Matthew 5:16 and Titus 3:14...
 - so we are functioning as Pacesetters this year...and it will only be for one Sunday--
 - but if you don't have the opportunity to participate at work and would like to through our church, you can do that using the white love offering envelopes next Sunday...
 - and I realize you might say – I'm not sure I'm comfortable with that – that's OK – this is a voluntary thing of course...but I'm not sure Phillip would have been all that comfortable going to the Samaritans...
 - that's not really the point, is it...the question is, do hard times reveal an opportunity for ministry with people who might be a lot different than us?...
- now there's some other observations we need to make about this...

D. Choosing to embrace God's values in hard times produces great joy.

- that is an amazing theme in light of the context but here it is...
 - **Acts 8:8 - So there was much rejoicing in that city.**
 - **Acts 8:39 - and the eunuch...went on his way rejoicing.**
 - I strongly believe that if you and I respond to the hard times we're facing in a mission driven way—the net effect will be greater joy for the church family...
- now you might say – but will it really make a difference?...that's a fair question, but again, let's go back to the text...

E. Don't fail to believe in the power of the gospel.

- it's true that Phillip was able to perform signs that you and I can't do in this day and age...

1. The Samaritans believed in the message of Christ, not the signs that pointed to Him.

- **8:16 – they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus**

- now, something occurred here that I probably need to quickly clear up...

2. They received the Holy Spirit subsequent to their faith in Christ.

- **Acts 8:14-15 - Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit.**
- remember something we said at the very beginning of this study...many of the events we're reading about are transitional in nature...between the Old covenant and the New...they are not normative for the church today...

- but this occurred in this fashion so there was no question on the part of the apostles or the Jewish believers that the Samaritans had genuinely trusted Christ and they had then truly received the Holy Spirit under apostolic authority...
- this was crucial for the preservation of the unity of the church...
- but the norm is that persons receive the Holy Spirit the moment they trust Christ...
- **Romans 8:9 - But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.**

- now, let's be sure we're not getting the cart before the horse this morning...

3. Have you trusted the gospel of Jesus Christ?

- **John 1:12 - But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name,**
- there will probably be people listening to this message today who have heard the gospel but never personally accepted it...
- the mission we're discussing today begins by becoming a child of God yourself...
- and just because you have the solution right in front of you doesn't mean you've embraced it...

4. Are you putting yourself in a position to proclaim it?

Romans 1:16 - For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

III. You Can Count on the Powerful Combination of God's Word and His Sweet Providence as you Serve Him in Hard Times.

- Phillip's story ends with this marvelous story of his witness to the Ethiopian Eunuch...

A. God is constantly preparing people.

- this man was like a ripe piece of fruit ready to be picked off the tree...

B. God's Word is an essential aspect of His preparatory work.

- here he is reading this beautiful passage from Isaiah 53...and God's Word is doing its work...
- but then it was "Phillip time"...

C. God wants His followers to demonstrate their faith.

- Phillip shares Christ and the Ethiopian believes...and the diversity of the church increases...
- and then the man is so excited about his new faith...he wants to do what every follower of Christ is commanded to do...not as a means of their salvation, but an evidence of it...
- here's a lot of water...because he understood that the word baptize means immerse—you wouldn't need a lot of water if you were going to sprinkle or dip or pour...
- and they both went down into the water...and this dear man identified Himself with the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ...

- how does God want you to respond to the hard times He has sovereignly orchestrated?
 1. Don't yet know Him – how about today?
 2. If you do – let hard times reveal a heart that is filled with a desire to accomplish the mission God has for us...especially because of the hard times we're in...