

FROM HARDSHIP TO HEADSHIP!

Today's Text: (1) Job, Chaps 38-42; (2) Matt. 19: 27-30

Extracts:

- 1. And the Lord restored Job's losses when he prayed for his friends. Indeed the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before. Then all his brothers, all his sisters, and all those who had been his acquaintances before, came to him and ate food with him in his house; and they consoled him and comforted him for all the adversity that the Lord had brought upon him [Job 42: 10-11]**
- 2. Then Peter answered and said to Him, "See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?" So Jesus said to him, "Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life" [Matt. 19: 27-29]**

In 1964, Nelson Mandela was brought to Robben Island, apartheid South Africa's worst prison, to serve a life sentence for his role in the attempt by the ANC [African National Congress] to make his country a multiracial democracy. He was put in a small cell, with the floor for his bed and a bucket for his toilet. He was entitled to one visitor per year for only 30 minutes, and for exercise, he did hard labour in a quarry.¹ There, he spent 18 of his 27 years in jail! In spite of his hardship, Mandela refused to be defeated by the evil and powerful forces of the apartheid regime. Finally, in February 1990, the apartheid government succumbed to internal and external pressures and set Mandela free to negotiate a new democratic order. On 10 May 1994, he became the first President of a multiracial Republic of South Africa. He had moved from the hardship of prison to the headship of his nation!

Has your hardship got to that level, where you are not sure of when or how it will end? Where are you feeling the pinch right now? Is it in your body or finances or relationships or what? Even trying to live an honest or a holy life in an increasingly depraved world is a form of hardship. In all cases, restoration cannot be taken for granted. God has a hand in turning your hardship around, to make you the head and no longer the tail! That is the subject of today's lesson. Again, the study will be based on the story of Job.

¹ www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/mandela/prison/

1. How “hard” is your hardship?

There is the story of two men who came to the temple in Jerusalem to ask God for a pressing favour. The first man who had just lost his job needed one hundred dollars to pay some pressing bills. The other man, a stockbroker, needed one million to buy a new home. The request had to be made at a particular spot in the temple for it to be granted. Each morning, the dirty-looking first man always arrived earlier. One day, the stockbroker got so angry that he asked the unemployed man, “Tell me, what do you want?” He replied, “All I need is \$100.” The rich man brought out a hundred dollar bill and threw it at him saying, “Take this and get out of my way!”

Between those two men, whose hardship was “harder”? Certainly the case of the first man was worse! The *pressures* on him were more urgent and his *ability* to deal with his situation, more uncertain. The way that we respond to hardship is influenced, *to a large extent*, by how long we think that it will last and what hope is there that it can be overcome. On that basis, we can think of four categories of hardship as follows:

a) *Category A hardship*

In this case, we have a fairly *clear idea of the duration of the hardship and its outcome*. This is well captured by David when he wrote, “Weeping may endure *for a night* but joy comes *in the morning*” [Ps. 30: 5]. A student on a 4-year degree programme knows that her hardship (financial or otherwise) will be reduced, if not over, within a few years. A person serving a fixed prison term is sure of being released when the term expires. In such cases, no matter the pains, you may be prepared to endure them.

b) *Category B hardship*

In this case, you are *sure of the outcome but you have no idea how long the hardship will last*. David knew that he would be the next king of Israel, having been so anointed. Yet, he did not know *when* he would be crowned. He did not become king until he was 30 years old, after spending about 13 years in the wilderness to escape Saul’s persecution. When the children of Israel left Egypt, they *knew* that they were going to the Promised Land. However, they were never told how long it would take to get there. In the end, the journey took 40 years and the generation (20 years and over) that left Egypt did not arrive!

This is the kind of hardship that floors many believers. They receive a prophetic word on what God has promised to give them. There is no word on *when* or *how*. In the process of walking by faith, they begin to walk by

presumption. They then interfere with God's plan and pay dearly for it with prolonged hardship.

c) *Category C hardship*

In this case, you have *no idea of the outcome and you anticipate that it will be for a short duration*. A person who has just lost a job may start looking for another one right away. S(he) is not sure if or when a new one will come but s(he) does not anticipate a long search. Otherwise, there will be a crisis!

Believers react differently from the unsaved when they both face Category C hardship. For example, when Peter was put in jail, after Herod had killed James, Peter was sure that it would not be for long before he would also die. When and how, he did not know. However, instead of whining about the situation, he simply fell asleep until an angel of the Lord came to set him free [Acts 12: 1-8]. Compare that with the Unjust Steward that was about to be sacked by his master. He was convinced that if he lost that job, his future was uncertain because he was too old to work and too ashamed to beg. He then went ahead to alter the accounts of his master's debtors so that he could rely on their largesse after his dismissal [Lk 16: 1-7]. That is hardly a solution to his hardship! Those who cut corners to deal with their hardship are like this steward.

d) *Category D hardship*

This is the most painful type of hardship. You have *no idea how long it will last or what will be its outcome*. People with incurable diseases experience this kind of hardship. In such circumstances, people of faith, like Job, go to God that has all the answers. Some strong-willed people draw on their inner strength to face the odds. Desperate people have committed suicide rather than continue to suffer.

No matter what you are passing through right now, it cannot be worse than Job's type (Category D). Therefore, you will like to know how he was able to move from "hardship to headship." That is the subject of the next section of our discussion.

2. Job's hardship was of Category D!

Job's arguments with his friends, as we saw last week, were couched in very uncertain terrain. Neither Job nor his friends knew what caused Job's hardship. None of them was sure of how it would end because, up to that time, God had not revealed to Job that he was actually bait in the contest between God and Satan in the spiritual realm.

There are some of you right now who are seeking help from family or friends, colleagues or counsellors, or ministers. Nobody seems to have hit the nail on the head. You are not comforted. You are not strengthened. You are not relieved. Your hardship is getting worse and there is no respite. Why does it seem that God has abandoned you? Yes, you still trust Him. Yes, you believe that nothing is impossible before Him. But why is He not responding? Job also asked similar questions. Finally, God answered him. Let us follow the sequence:

a) *God speaks* [**Job, Chaps 38-41**]

God began by questioning face-to-face [in a whirlwind] Job's knowledge of His creations and nature. He began by saying, "Who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Now prepare yourself like a man, and I will question you, and you shall answer Me" [**Job 38: 1-3**]. After reeling off some of His wondrous creations, God asked Job, "Shall the one who contends with the Almighty correct Him? He who rebukes God, let him answer it" [**Job 40: 1-2**].

That is scary! So, you who are questioning God about your hardship, He is asking you the same questions. Can you answer Him? Can the clay tell the potter how it should be used? [**Is. 45: 9**]. *He does not owe you any explanations and do not expect any! Just learn to trust Him.*

b) *Job repents* [**Job 42: 4-6**]

Job acknowledged God's sovereignty, "I know that You can do *everything*, and that no purpose of Yours can be withheld from You. ... Therefore, I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know." Then, he humbled himself and confessed, "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear. But now my eye sees You. *Therefore, I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes*" [**vv. 1-6**].

Like Job, you should stop questioning God's sovereignty and go on your knees to ask for His forgiveness for going astray with your complaints and grumbling. Are you sure that you did not blaspheme Him in reaction to your unending hardship? Ask for forgiveness.

c) *Job's headship is restored!* [**vv. 7-17**]

Critically examine the process of Job's restoration:

- God forgave and accepted Job;
- God rebuked Job's detractors for their folly, and commanded them to bring offerings [such as bulls and rams] so that Job could pray for them, as the basis for God to forgive them;

- After praying for his friends, God restored Job’s losses and gave him “twice as much as he had before” [v. 10]. He lost 7,000 sheep. Now, he got 14, 000. He lost 3,000 camels, now he had 6,000. All other losses were restored a hundredfold, except his children. He lost 7 sons and 3 daughters and that was the number restored to him. Do you know why? With his material blessings doubled and the number of children remaining the same, *per capita*, each child got a double portion!
- All of Job’s brothers, sisters and acquaintances came back, bringing him food, silver and gold [v. 11]. They once more acknowledged his headship.
- Job lived another 140 years and saw four generations of his children and grandchildren [v. 16]. In deed, it is with long life that God satisfies believers and shows them His salvation [Ps. 91: 16].

3. Lessons

The following lessons are vividly illustrated in Job’s story:

a) *The purpose of hardship*

From his hardship, Job learnt *humility* and the *all-sufficiency of God’s grace*. This point can also be found in Paul’s reaction to the “thorn in the flesh,” which God allowed a messenger of Satan to use to buffet him [2 Cor. 12: 7-10]. Thrice, Paul pleaded with God to relieve him of the hardship and God replied, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” What lessons did Paul learn from the hardship and God’s response to it? First, it taught him humility “lest I be exalted above measure” [v. 7]. Second, it warned Paul off presumption in prayer [v. 8] and to instead depend on the sufficiency of God’s grace [v. 9]. Consequently, Paul came to learn how to deal with hardship: “Therefore, I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong” [v. 10]. That should be your attitude to hardship.

b) *Focus on God’s purpose, not on the hardship*

Most times, we pay so much attention to our problems that we lose sight of God’s purpose behind them. Yet, when we pluck roses, we forget that they are embedded in thorns! Hardship can be a form of correction and God corrects those whom He loves. “If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten?” [Heb. 12: 3-8]. Therefore, as you carry the cross of hardship, focus on the crown of glory that awaits you at the end!

c) *Pray for your detractors/enemies*

Job was restored after he had prayed for his friends who had tormented him with their incomplete knowledge of God's mercy and judgment. Similarly, you should pray for those who are contributing to your hardship because they may actually be the instruments that God is using to bring you to His promise for you. Mrs. Potiphar whose false allegation put Joseph in prison was an instrument in fulfilling God's plan for Joseph to become the governor of Egypt and saviour of his family from future famine. It was in prison that Joseph met Pharaoh's butler who ultimately mentioned him to the king in God's own time. Therefore, that boss who is sitting on your promotion may actually be carrying out God's purpose. Why don't you pray for him/her while you wait for God's time?

d) *Restoration wipes off the memory of hardship!*

Just as faith sustains you during hardship, your restoration wipes off the pains of hardship. Therefore, you should strive to get to the point of restoration *by trusting God to complete what He has begun in you.* Nothing less will do!

4. Conclusion

When Peter asked Jesus what was there for them who had given up family and earthly pleasures to follow Him, He promised them a throne for each of the 12 apostles to judge the 12 tribes of Israel, a doubling of the earthly wealth that they had lost, and finally, eternal life in heaven [**Matt. 19: 27-30**]. We saw those promises fulfilled in the life of Job.

For the modern believer, everyday is stressful because "all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" [**2 Tim. 3: 12**]. You try to be honest in public life or tell the truth on issues and the world will call you a dangerous extremist! You try to earn an honest living and they will call you a fool. Consequently, a great majority of those passing through hardship are believers! But don't give up because you are being prepared for the headship of both material and spiritual blessings, *if only you will persevere.* Hang in there until victory!

In God's sight, a night and a thousand years are one and the same [**Ps. 90: 4**]. Your hardship may linger for a night or a thousand years, but joy comes in a *moment.* Hang in there!