

When Taking Responsibility is Hard

Decision Making & God's Will

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This morning I'd like to begin our time by explaining to you why I don't handle trials any better than I do and I'm going to be speaking tongue in cheek, in other words, I don't really believe these things but I just want to try them out on you to stimulate our thinking here; in a sense, I'm not sure you're going to buy into my reasons. I'm actually going to give you several versions but as I offer these different reasons or perhaps excuses for why I don't handle trials any better than I do, ask yourself these questions of each one I post: 1. could there be a nugget of truth in these particular reason? And then, however you would answer that: is this a valid reason for not handling a trial well? And then, thirdly, will taking this position increase one's hope or decrease it? Lastly, will taking this position make personal change and improvement more likely or less likely? If I believe this, if I think this, will it make change easier or harder?

Why don't I handle trials any better than I do? Well, here's the first reason: it's because of the imperfections of the people around me. You see, I'd be a lot happier if my family members and my co-workers and just people in general, treated me better because I'm a really good person, but the problem is my personal environment. It's the people around me. See, if you put me around different people, I would come alive in ways you would never dream possible. My flower would just naturally unfold. What do you think of that one? You don't need to answer, you just need to think quietly.

Or, how about this: the reason I don't handle trials any better is because of the imperfections of the things around me. I need more things. I need better things. I need more dependable things. I need more money. So, it's not my personal environment, it's my material environment. It's stuff. Because I'm really a good person and I'd be much more happy, much more productive, if I just had more. And, by the way, it wouldn't necessarily need to be a lot more, just more.

Or this: the reason I don't handle trials any better is because of my past. I came from an imperfect family and my parents were imperfect. My two sisters were really imperfect. My home town was great but it was still slightly imperfect. You see, I'm really a good person, but my past is holding me back, it's enslaving me. It has programmed me in ways that I can't control. I would handle difficulties today a whole lot better if I just had a different past.

Or this: well, it's my genes. You see, I'm a good person. Have I mentioned that? I'm a good person but I have a genetic predisposition to handling trials poorly. My grandfather used to lose his temper and my father used to lose his temper so it's not surprising that I sometimes lose my temper but it's my genes. And I'm also Irish and I used to have red hair. You can decide if you think that's true for a second.

Please evaluate these positions in light of the four questions I posed earlier. What about: could there be any truth in these ideas? Well, sure, I mean we all have had imperfect people around us. Incidentally, anytime you're around the number of imperfect people increases by one but that's a totally different issue. And we all have things in our past that are difficult and I recognize that I'll be speaking to people this morning who have some heinous things that have occurred in your past and I don't want to minimize that. Sometimes individuals suffer with things that are intergenerational. I'm not going to say that they're genetic but tendencies of one generation, if not handled biblically, have a way of being repeated in the next generation. And who knows what scientists will one day discover about our genetic make-up so I'm not suggesting that the positions that I articulated are absolutely and entirely false.

What about the second question I posed? Is that a valid reason for not handling a trial well? Could anything that I said or anything that you could possibly imagine be a legitimate excuse to not take personal responsibility? Regarding a trial that comes, can we ever take the position: the words I just said were not my fault? The face I just made was not my fault? The actions I just took were not my fault? I'm absolved from any personal responsibility in this matter because of _____. Is there anything that could legitimately go in that blank?

What about the third question? Will taking one of these positions increase one's hope or decrease it? So, if we blame our behavior on the people around us, what does that do to our level of hope? Well, it goes down. Why? Because we're tethering our joy and satisfaction to whether somebody else in our life changes and we have no control over that.

What if we blame it on our material circumstances? Again, same thing: our hope is going to go down. Why? Because many of our material circumstances are out of our control. And, by the way, even if you could instantly increase your material condition, a quick look around you at people who have it better than you materially, doesn't seem to indicate that they handle trials any better than you. In fact, often the opposite is the case because they have more stuff to look after and more things to lose. The same is true if we blame things on the past or blame them on our genes or on our former hair color or ethnic background. Those things can't be changed so if you place your focus there, invariably you're robbed of hope.

What about this last question? Will taking one of those positions make personal change and improvement more likely or less? Will it make changing easier or harder? We all know the answer to that, don't we? Every second spent focusing on the failures of others

is a second not spent focusing on the failures of one's self. And there is no such thing as genuine change without first acknowledging the need for that change to occur.

We're talking today about decision making in the will of God, when taking responsibility is hard. Many times the most difficult aspect of a trial is not what it does to us, but what it reveals about us and if we're not thinking biblically, we can spend an incredible amount of time and effort placing the focus on where it really does not belong.

With that in mind I want to invite you to open your Bible this morning to 1 Peter 1. That's on page 180 of the back section of the Bible under the chair in front of you if you need that this morning. This fall we're working our way verse-by-verse through this great book of 1 Peter together and we've already observed that these words are all about trials and difficulties and how God can help us handle them well. The book is actually addressed to people who are called aliens; pilgrims who are living during a time of great and increasing persecution on the church at the hand of this wicked emperor Nero. The readers have been scattered far from their homes to places like Pontus and Cappadocia and Bithynia and Peter is very honest in these first two verses about the severity of their situation. But it's interesting that he doesn't suggest that their difficult times excuse them from personal responsibility. In fact, the polar opposite is the case and we're going to see that very clearly now in the verses we're going to study this morning.

1 Peter 1:13-16. Please listen carefully to the Word of God. "Therefore, prepare your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children," there's the way we're to view ourselves, "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, 'YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY.'"

We're talking this morning about what to do when taking responsibility is hard. I'd like to propose to you that from these verses, we can find two characteristics of the individual who accepts, rejoices in and acts on, personal responsibility during times of trial. This is what we want to be like. One is a life of steadfast hope. This is one of those passages where just about every phrase is dripping with practical truth. The theme for this series is "Understanding the Will of God." If you really want to understand God's plan, understand God's will for your life, these verses are like a kid walking through a theological candy store. But it's important to note that grammatically, the wording that Peter chooses, places the primary emphasis on this phrase "fix your hope completely." That's the controlling verb. Put all that together in your mind. What that means is: yes, Peter is very honest about the pain of these multi-colored trials. We all face them but he's equally insistent that God's people can have hope in the midst of them.

The beauty of verses 13-16 is that Peter begins to tell his readers how that occurs. These are how-to kind of verses; how do you fix your hope completely during a time of trial. Here is how: by having a prepared mind. The verse says, "prepare your minds for action," or if you learned this verse in the old King James version, it says "gird up the loins of

your mind,” or “gird your minds for action.” Friend, this isn’t the easiest thing to hear but it really is true: the primary issue during a time of trial is not what other people in your life are doing and it’s not your material or financial condition, it is not the kind of parents you had, it’s not your genes, it’s not your hair, it’s not your nationality. The primary thing is what you’re going to do with your mind; what you’re going to allow occur in your heart; how you’re going to choose to think about the trials that a sovereign God has given you because it really is correct that outlook determines outcome. This verse is telling us that we have to have our minds prepared in advance so we’re ready when trials come.

That’s the point of this word picture, “girding up the loins of your mind for action.” I realize you might say, “I have not used that phrase all week long in conversation, girding up the loins of my mind.” That’s alright, sometimes the Bible is trying to get your attention. In Bible times, men wore long robes or tunics, before the birth of Levi Strauss, so that’s what they wore, long robes or tunics which were fine for walking, I suppose, but terrible for running and terrible for fighting. So, you would take a leather strap, like a belt, and you would bring it up between your legs so you were ready to move quickly, you were preparing yourself. That’s a picture. You were preparing yourself for action. You were girding up your loins.

Well, you’ll never have biblical hope if you’re not working on having a prepared mind. Here’s what we’re talking about: thinking through ahead of time how God would have us respond to trials and difficulties of life. In other words, slowing up long enough to think through. Now, if such and such would happen, here’s what I need to think and here’s what I need to say, here’s what I need to do. And I realize you might push back at that and say, “Now wait a minute. We can’t always anticipate what kind of trials might come our way.” Did you just think that? Did you just blow off 1 Peter 1:13 because of that argument? Well, let me push back, back. The other side of that is that it is amazing how often our trials center on predictable themes and on predictable people. Right? It’s also amazing how often our sinful responses to those trials center on predictable words and predictable thoughts and predictable actions.

Some of us spend far too much time blaming our sinful responses to trials on others when that time would have been far better spent planning how to respond the next time that trial comes. It’s like a student getting ready for an exam. You can either sit around and complain about the course and complain about the teacher and complain about your former school that really didn’t prepare you well, blah, blah, blah. Or, here’s an idea, you could get your notes out and start studying and planning what questions might be on the test and how you will best answer those questions if they show up.

Please think about the relationship between being prepared and having hope. When you’re prepared well for a test and you’ve fulfilled your responsibility in advance, it’s amazing how much hope that gives you. It’s amazing how that calms your heart. Well, the exact same thing is true of trials. In fact, just think about the trials that you faced last week. That won’t be hard to think about, will it, because we all have them. Were you prepared? Had you thought about them in advance? Does the way you responded to them demonstrate that you had a hope in your heart because you were ready?

Several possible action steps are coming out of these verses already wouldn't you think? In fact, I know what you're thinking right now, you're thinking, "I wish my pastor loved me so much that he'd just give me some homework right now." Is that what you're thinking? "I wonder if he loves me that much?" Here's the news: I do. I love you. So, here it is: let me give you some possible action steps. One would be to go back through verses 1-12 and write on index cards all the reasons for having hope that are given in these verses because these early verses especially talk about your position in Christ, the benefits of salvation, the gospel indicatives, we say. And it would be wise to write those down and to have those as a foundation of here's what's absolutely true, cannot be taken away from me, during a particular time of trial. That might help.

Secondly, hear this: you might be helped by sitting down and writing out the trial that you seem to do most poorly in. You got it, right now, the trial that you seem to do most poorly in and plan out, in advance, how God would want you to respond if that situation comes up again. Plan it out. And, since some of us tend to laziness, a third homework assignment might be to draw and accountability partner into that process, to have somebody actually help you think it through and to have somebody that you've committed before God to, that you're going to try to handle that in a more prepared fashion next time it comes around, in a more godly fashion the next time it comes around. In fact, you're going to ask your friend to ask you a week from now whether or not that trial surfaced again and whether or not you handled it in a better way because you had girded up the loins of your mind.

Fourthly, I would encourage those of you who have children in your home, walk them through the exact same process. They face trials too. And part of why God gave children parents is to help them do this exact same thing: to help them prepare their little minds for action, to think through trials in advance and to determine, with the help of God, I'm going to put off any wrong responses that would displease God and here's what the Lord would have me to do when that trial comes up again. Gird up your minds, Peter says, for action.

Another way to develop steadfast hope is to have a sober spirit. You saw that, undoubtedly, in verse 13, "keep sober in spirit." That's a very important concept. Peter is not talking here about not getting intoxicated. He's using that particular image to describe what some people allow to happen in their spirits, to happen in their hearts during a time of trouble. And just like the person who is drunk has no control over his faculties, a person who is not sober in spirit has no control over his heart, has no control over his mind. Hebert said of this verse that it denotes a condition free from every form of mental and spiritual loss of self-control. Again, think about the last trial you faced. How sober were you? It denotes a condition free from every form of mental and spiritual loss of self-control and inculcates a calm, steady state of mind that evaluates things correctly, that is, biblically, that is not thrown off balance.

You see, some of God's people during a time of trial get out of control. Their minds are racing imagining all kinds of things that probably will never happen, assuming the worst

about people in situations around them. They are drunk. They are intoxicated. They are inebriated. They are drunk with worry. They are drunk with fear during that time of trial. They are drunk with anger. And as a result, they've robbed themselves of hope.

Our personal responsibility during a time of trial is to have a prepared mind and to cultivate a sober spirit and by having a fixed hope. As we said before, this is actually the controlling verb in this verse: "fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ." Not, "I'll be happy when I get a raise." Friend, if that's where your hope is, you have it placed in the wrong thing. Or, "I'll be happy when my spouse changes." Seriously? "I'll be happy when I get a new job. I'll be happy when I get out of this house. I'll be happy when I graduate. I'll be happy when the market goes up. I'll be happy when my church does everything my way." Blah, blah, blah, blah. You and I have a personal responsibility to fix our hope, where? On the grace of God as he helps us handle our response to the trial in a way that brings honor to him and on the grace of God that saved us in the first place which is our only hope and on the grace of God that will be revealed in the last day. He expects us to take personal responsibility but when we do, he helps us fulfill that responsibility which is part of his grace.

I realize you might say, "You know, Pastor Viars, I've been coming to this church now for three weeks and I've listened to you talk about this matter of trial for three weeks and nothing has changed and nothing has happened." Well, note a very important phrase in this passage: when will all of this have been completed? When will all of this be made right? When will this grace be fully realized? It's at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Have you noticed the strong emphasis on the end times all throughout this book? Peter is trying to get us and this is one of the reasons we get off on trials. It's like, "This is the most important thing in my life forever." Seriously? The guy who just cut you off in traffic is your most important thing forever? And if that seems to come up a lot today, I did get cut off a few times this week trying to get down to McDonald's. Seriously, it's getting dangerous.

Look at the text: "reserved in heaven for you." It's not reserved at the bank. It's not reserved at Meyer, it's reserved in heaven for you. It's to be revealed not now but in the last time. Verse 7, "it may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." So, I'm suggesting during a time of trial that if your hope is on something happening in the next five minutes, your hope is in the wrong place. If your hope is on your circumstances changing in this life or the people around you changing in this life, your hope is in the wrong place.

I'm not suggesting, by the way, that we shouldn't work at changing circumstances if that's appropriate. Sometimes it is. Or helping people see ways they need to change if that's appropriate. Sometimes it is. But our ultimate hope ought to be in the fact that taking responsibility during time of trial, focusing on what we ought to be saying, what we ought to be thinking, what we ought to be doing, trusting God to give us the grace to do that well, some day that approach to living for God will be rewarded. So our hope isn't on things being made right, now. Our hope is on things being made right, then. Social commentator Michael Medved once said, "The media wants us to look forward to

the next commercial. Religious thinking wants us to look forward to the next life.” That is exactly right.

Incidentally, wasn't that the difference between Lot and Abraham? It had to do with this very issue. Why was Abraham so godly and so successful while Lot was so wicked and so ineffective? Abraham had his eyes on eternity. Do you remember this commentary in Hebrews 11: “By faith Abraham when he was called obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance. He went out not knowing where he was going. By faith he lived as an alien.” There's his trial, “in the land of promise as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise.” Here it is, “for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”

Peter wanted his readers to set their hope not on changing their circumstances, not on making everything right in their world today. He wanted them to accept through personal responsibility for the way they handled their trial, believing that one day in eternity the fact that they had glorified their Savior and learned how to live in and through his grace, would be worth it. Do you agree? And does the way you tend to handle trials demonstrate that your hope is in the right place?

Some of you are aware of a ministry up in Union Grove, Wisconsin called Shepherds. Shepherds is a ministry to adults with special needs. Our church has supported it for a long, long time. We've had some members as residents there over the years. It's a marvelous ministry. We've had people serve on the board over there. They have a group that travels. Adults with special needs who minister in local churches and they've come to our church from time to time and some of you who have been around our church a longer period of time will remember that frequently in that presentation they will have a spot where one of the residents will sing the song “It Will Be Worth It All.” And there's nothing quite like seeing one of those adults with special needs, many times in a very simple fashion, with broken speech, sing the words to that song. Do you know the words? “Oft times the day seems long.” Think about that from the perspective of an adult with special needs.

“Oft times the day seems long,
Our trials hard to bear.
We're tempted to complain,
To murmur and despair.
But Christ will soon appear,
To catch his bride away!
All tears forever over,
In God's eternal day!”

Do you know the next words?

“It will be worth it all,
When we see Jesus!”

Life's trials..."

I can picture the times I've seen that presentation where many times the person singing will just stutter through all of this because that's the best he can do but he loves Christ and he believes in a better day.

"Life's trials will seem so small,
When we see Christ.
One glimpse of his dear face,
All sorrow will erase.
So, bravely run the race,
Till we see Christ."

Friends, if a special needs adult can sing a song like that with joy in his heart and a smile on his face, surely you and I can prepare our minds for action. Surely, you and I can ask God to help us be sober in spirit. And surely, you and I can fix our hope completely on the grace of God that is to be revealed in the time of the revelation. Peter wanted his readers to set their hope not on changing their circumstances but on taking personal responsibility.

Friend, all this leads to some questions, doesn't it? I would encourage you and I've mentioned this several times already, to think about a recent trial. And for some of you, you say, "I wouldn't even have to think beyond this morning." That's okay. Think about a recent trial, think about your response to a recent trial and then ask, are you spending so much time focusing on how bad others are and how bad your circumstances are that you're not putting the right amount of attention on preparing your own mind for action and developing a sober spirit and asking God to help you develop that more and being sure that your hope is in the right place. And you might say, "Boy, Pastor Viars, if I did that with any level of consistency, I would be in a much better place in my relationship with God. Well, that's what John said about that. John said, "Everyone who has this hope fixed on him," see, fixed on him, "purifies himself just as he is pure."

That brings us to the second characteristic of the individual who accepts responsibility. They cultivate a life of personal holiness. Peter says, "as obedient children." Did you see that? Verse 14, "do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, 'YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY.'" Peter is encouraging these dear brothers and sisters in Christ who are living like aliens and strangers to see their trials as a means of cultivating personal holiness. So, don't lash out at your circumstances. Don't lash out at those mistreating you. See that as a perfect opportunity to grow.

You might say, "That's a tall order." Sure it is. Sure it is. The power of Christ working in you can help you do amazing things. "Well, how?" Take a cue from the passage: by having a right view of one's self, "as obedient children." You see, when you came to Christ, you were acknowledging his worth as your heavenly Father and you were

acknowledging him as the rightful Creator and you were acknowledging yourself as a person who, in and of yourself, had no merit before him. And so you came to him, if you have, and if you haven't, I hope you would today, but you came to him not with your hands full of your adult-like merit that somehow you could earn favor before him, but you came in child-like faith with hands that were empty and trusted what Jesus Christ did on the cross as your only hope of salvation. And the Scripture says that if there has been a definite time when you've done that, "As many as received him, to them gave he power to become the children, the sons of God." Recognizing that this is God's world. He is sovereign over the affairs of this world and he has a right to bring whatever into my life he chooses to and I will respond as an obedient child.

We also develop personal holiness by breaking the mold of our former lusts. Verse 14 says, "don't be conformed to the former lusts which were yours by ignorance." Trials have a way of revealing the lusts of your heart. Trials have a way, when you're in the pressure cooker, it has a way of revealing what you want the most, what you believe will satisfy you, what you believe will make you happy. And, friend, I hope you've walked with Christ long enough to understand that many of those desires that naturally rage in your heart are displeasing to God and need to be put to death. And as you choose to let trials reveal the things about you that you want so badly, that would take you down a road of destruction, that you choose to put them to death and then replace them with desires that would honor the Lord.

Listen, we are living in a wicked world and part of the characteristic of our wicked world is the belief that I ought to do whatever I want. Would it be hard for me to demonstrate from our culture in the last seven days just how wicked our world is? And we're not here to criticize the world but we're simply here to say our world screams and sometimes and screams, shouts, dances around, the message that this is my party and I can do whatever I want. God says differently. God says "every man is tempted," James 1:14, "when he is drawn away of his own lust and enticed. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death."

Our culture is living in the midst of Romans 1 and that is not a compliment because Romans 1 says that when people choose to not acknowledge God as their Creator, to not acknowledge God as the one who made them and who knows what's best for our life, instead gives into their own lusts and eventually they will live in a way that is animalistic sexually. That's the point of Romans 1 and our culture demonstrates the truth of that passage day in and day out. Again, we're not here to criticize culture. There is a sense in which, as our culture continues to become more wicked and lust filled, it makes it easier for us to do our job because if you're the kind of person who says, "It's not my party. I'm not going to do things my own way. As trials come, I'm going to allow those trials to reveal desires and desires that displease God I'm going to choose to put them to death as an obedient child and I'm going to embrace desires, here's what God wants me to want, therefore, I'm going to choose to want the same thing." And when you can allow trials to help you acknowledge and change your former lusts, you're living in a way that honors the Lord. Ultimately, then, you're committed to personal holiness, but like the holy one

who called you be holy yourselves also in your behavior because it is written, you shall be holy for I am holy. Trials can help you grow in your personal holiness.

I recognize you might say, “Boy, Pastor Viars, it’s been pretty heavy today. Happy holiday to you, too.” Well, God’s Word is so counter-cultural, isn’t it? But I am thoroughly convinced that God’s way is best. Do you agree? In fact, think about your best day. Think about the days where you believed you accomplished the most. Think about the days where you honestly believed that God was at work and I believe it will be the very kind of days where you chose to walk the path that is articulated in this passage. I imagine you could say things like, “One of my best days was when I finally got a handle on my sinful anger. Because I stopped blaming things on everybody else and instead started preparing my mind for action and developing a sober spirit and fixing my hope on eternity. I was finally able to respond to that person in a godly way instead of a sinful way.” Or this, “One of my best days was when I got to a much better place on lusting about being treated fairly. So many times before I would sulk if I didn’t get my way or pout or give others the slow freeze, but then I decided to stop blaming my responses on everybody else and I entrusted the way other people in my life were living to my heavenly Father and I just focused on living as one of his obedient children and I focused on personal holiness and I prepared my mind for action. I developed a sober spirit. I put my hope on fair treatment in eternity, not fair treatment today. And when I was mistreated I responded in a holy fashion. I responded to that trial in a way that drew on the grace of God. I responded in a way that honored Christ.”

You see, it’s all about taking responsibility and then asking and trusting God for the grace to fulfill that responsibility well.

Let’s stand together for prayer.

Father in heaven, thank you for the opportunity to study your Word and thank you for calling us to a high level of responsibility, not in our own strength but causing us to think about the truth of the gospel that makes it possible for us to live this way. And thank you that even though our lusts to go the wrong direction may be raging, thank you for the hope in this text that those can be our former lusts. So, Lord, for those who are here who could say that “the way I handled trials is different,” we praise you. And for those of us who would say “the way I handle trials needs to get better,” we ask that you would help us put feet to those prayers this week. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.