

The 'Ups And Downs' Of the Christian Life

Acts 4: 1-4

"The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. ² They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. ³ They seized Peter and John and, because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day".

No matter how much life can appear to be running smoothly, there is always a rough patch looming somewhere around the corner - isn't there?

Some people say that if life was easy, then it would be boring! - Maybe they are right (A bit easier wouldn't hurt though). However, that is not the way things are. Life is tough no matter who you are. The reality is there is usually some conflict in our lives at some point or another.

From what we can understand from the proceeding verses in our text from the book of Acts, things had been running smoothly in Jerusalem for the 'religious establishment'.

They had crucified Jesus - problem sorted (or so they thought) and they could get back to their everyday business. However, they then heard that the body of Jesus was missing from the Tomb. Some people had even said that they had seen Jesus alive!

Rather than 'snuffing out' this faith, it was now growing daily by the thousands - so much so, that some ordinary, unschooled men, were preaching that Jesus was resurrected from the dead and were incredibly healing people in His name, but they were doing it on 'their patch' without any authority. However, their presumed peace was about to be disturbed and they were heading for conflict- a showdown they couldn't avoid.

Things were much the same for the believers and the disciples in Jerusalem- since the resurrection, they had experienced unprecedented success. They were 'on a roll' with no opposition in sight. Jesus was alive - he had proved it by appearing to more than 500 of them! Awe had come upon them all and they were given miraculous powers. They met daily together and had 'glad and generous hearts'- more and more were being added to their numbers and they had the favour of both God and the people (for a short time anyway!).

Then suddenly, through an act of kindness (the healing of a sick man), they were to meet head on with the 'other side' in this conflict- the leaders in Jerusalem. It was their first encounter with opposition and it was inevitable it would happen, just as day follows night - it was only a matter of time.

I came to faith in the eighties and there was a message going around at the time (and you may hear the same today) which was '*come to Jesus and all your problems will disappear*' they would be a thing of the past - you will float around on some 'fluffy cloud' continually filled with love, joy and peace. However, that is not entirely true is it - how many of you have had that experience? You may 'float around' for a little while but you soon 'bump back down to earth'. We, as Christians, are not inoculated against life's difficulties or protected from opposition. You won't find that teaching anywhere in the bible - listen to what Jesus says: John 16.33 - *"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world"*.

There pervades this misguided idea or expectation in 21st-century life today, that life should be trouble-free and be all health, wealth and success. Sadly, there are doctrines entering into the Christian church, particularly in Pentecostal and Charismatic circles, that say it is '*God's will*' that this life should be trouble-free. In fact, they say the only way to have an enjoyable life, is to be

free from trouble or any problems. Now, not only is that not real life, (pie in the sky) - it is also not true.

There is a book I came across entitled *'Ten Steps to an Easy Life -Without Struggle'* 'this is a sample from it: -*"Know that an easy life, a life without struggle, is not only possible, but is natural. If you do not intuitively know this to be true, or know that an easy life is within your grasp, your life will, indeed, be a struggle. This is a fundamental sponsoring thought -life is either easy or difficult - you choose it - and then you get it!"*

I think this is why many Christians can get frustrated - because they are looking for this life that is free from trials, troubles and difficulties and when they don't experience it, or find it in their own reality (and they often don't), they can become depressed.

And the Christian walk is not an absent from problems. God doesn't necessarily take us out of our difficult circumstances, it's about finding God's grace in that place of trial or difficult circumstance of overcoming - by his grace in the midst of the difficulty.

It does seem that so often, we are pushing against a strong wind from the opposite direction - doesn't it? Why is that? Clearly life is not all 'plain sailing' and sometimes we end up just about hanging on, hanging in there - however, it is good to know what we are up against.

What are our areas of opposition as Christians? Firstly, there is an opposition that goes on inside of us - it's called *'sin'*. You don't hear too much of this today - probably because there is some misunderstanding of what part it plays in our lives. I noticed that the word 'sin' has been removed from the *Junior English Dictionary* because it's not seen as relevant anymore!. If it was only that easy to remove it from our lives! Let's define 'sin' as 'missing the mark' (the bull's-eye) - falling short of the desired central target in thought, word and deed. The target bull's-eye in regard to an absence of sin is found in the life of Jesus - the pinnacle of God's Holy standard and commandments.

The bible says we are born with sin and it comes all the way down the gene line from Adam. We cannot eliminate it fully from our lives - even as Christians.

As Christians, both the **power and the penalty** for sin have been taken away by Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection from the grave. However, the **presence** of sin still remains in our lives. With God's help and Power; we have a responsibility not to let it reign in our lives. There was a teaching some years ago which implied that sin could be completely eradicated from our lives - but it's false teaching! We will always struggle with it to some degree this side of heaven.

1 John: 8 says: - *'If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us'*. The power of sin was broken at the cross by Jesus' death and resurrection but we still have the sinful nature present within us.

So firstly, we have a struggle - this opposition of sin in our lives. With temptation we have to turn our back on it and resist - it's a daily struggle and we can only combat the presence sin in our lives with the power of the Holy Spirit.

Secondly, we have to overcome spiritual forces of evil. The bible says in Eph 6 - *"our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms"*. CS Lewis said - *'There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence, the other, is to believe and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors'*. However, the devil can be

subtle. He was that suggestive voice in the Garden of Eden - *'didn't God say'* and he is the same voice in our lives that bring doubt and fear. We ignore it at our peril. The enemy cannot take away what God has given us. Our salvation is safe - but the tactic of these spiritual forces is to frustrate us both personally and as a Church corporately, from walking with God and receiving all he has for us. However we need not fear him, as he is a defeated foe.

How do we overcome these spiritual forces? - *'resist the devil and he will flee from you'* scripture says to resist in God's strength and power, again through the Holy Spirit.

Thirdly, the other area of opposition we have is the world - with its principles and philosophy - pulling us towards it all the time and trying to draw us in. However, we are of another kingdom.

John 15:19 says this - *'If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you'*.

This is what Peter and John were up against not just the authorities - who didn't like what they were doing or saying, even though it was an act of kindness, because they had their own selfish interests to maintain.

So these are the areas of our opposition. Let us not be surprised when they occur, as it is 'part and parcel' of our Christian life. We can however, face them with joy and confidence.

Like Peter and John, who reported back to the other believers what had happened and they were all "encouraged and praised God" because it showed God was with them, there is 'no real gain - without some pain'.

Lastly, we know that whatever life may throw at us, we are more than overcomers in Jesus.

As the book of Hebrews says:

"So then, let us fix our eyes upon 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 not lose heart".

Amen.

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