

Circumstances and Faith

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We know from the Old Testament that God promised the Israelites not only to deliver them from slavery, but to take them into a rich, lush land. This land had houses, vineyards, cisterns - indeed it was "a land flowing with milk and honey." (Ex 3:8 NIV). God promised it and He does not lie. It was theirs. Yet, according to the Book of Hebrews, they failed to enter into this land because of their unbelief. (See Heb 3:19). Isn't that a tragedy? The Israelites never fully entered into their inheritance in the Lord because of their unbelief.

Question: What caused their unbelief?

Answer: Circumstances. You see, the Israelites did the "sensible thing." They sent scouts into the land to check it out. The scouts returned with stories of great riches and abundant provision but they also reported that there were cities walled to the sky and giants who lived there. This report so overwhelmed the Israelites that they allowed these circumstances to overrule the word of the living God - thereby producing unbelief.

Question: Are we subject to that same trap?

Answer: Most unfortunately, the answer is a resounding, "Yes!" Very often we allow circumstances to overrule the word of God which in turn produces unbelief in us.

Just as with the Israelites, in order for us to enter into God's promises, we too must walk by faith despite circumstances. God wants us, His children, not only to learn what it means to walk by faith, but to do it. We often fail in faith walking because we want to see the end before we begin. This is not walking by faith, it's "walking by sight." To God, very often walking by sight is unbelief. Walking by sight is really walking in darkness. Walking according to God's word is walking in the true light. The Psalmist said, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path." (Ps 119:105 NIV). The psalmist was saying that his walk was illumined only by what God said. He walked in the light of God's word. That is walking by faith.

Circumstances Defined

Webster's Dictionary defines circumstance as "a fact or event accompanying another fact or event..." That's simple enough. Real world examples of circumstances may be, "I lost my job. I may lose all I've got," or "My child is gravely ill and I'm very worried," and so on.

I want to make it clear here that I know circumstances are very real, very powerful, and are quite often devastating. I do not want to make light of anyone's hardships, pain, or suffering. Pain and suffering are real. It would be absolutely foolish to deny them or to somehow try to pretend that some circumstances are not as bad as they appear. But what I do want to do is to contrast circumstances with faith in the Word of God.

The Word of God

God's word comes in two forms: the written word and the spoken word. The written word is the Bible. The Bible is the Divinely inspired word of God which is infallible in its original text. It is totally reliable - man can fully rely on every word in the Bible.

The spoken word is God, by His Holy Spirit speaking into the heart, mind, or spirit of the believer and is known as God's *rhema*. Such speaking comes in various forms. It may come as a small voice in one's spirit. It may come during Bible study or prayer. It may come during the preaching of the word. It is that word from God which hits us like a lightning bolt. When we receive this *rhema*, we know that God is speaking to us. It is our personal word from God, by His Spirit, regarding something on our heart. Whether the word of God is from the Bible or by His *rhema*, it is the definitive word of God.

Circumstances Will Always Oppose Faith

The world's circumstances very often will contradict God's word. The world's circumstances very often will oppose what God has said. The world's circumstances very often will deny the truth of Scripture. Indeed the circumstances of our lives can be the archenemy of faith. Then why are we so prone to believing circumstances instead of believing in the word of God?

The answer lies in the fact that we do indeed live in the world. We are born into the world; we are educated and trained in the world. The world is very real to us every moment of every day. All our lives we have made decisions based on what we see, hear, feel, smell or taste. The material world has ruled. Therefore we are prone to believe what the world says, even when the world's circumstances oppose the word of God.

But our real citizenship is in the kingdom of God. Paul plainly tells us this, "But our citizenship is in heaven." (Phil 3:20 NIV). God is not of this material world and neither are we. God is of the supernatural, spirit world and so are we. Oh, yes, we live in this world but we are not its citizens. Listen to what Peter said: "Dear friends, I urge you, as **aliens and strangers** in the world..." (1 Pet 2:11 NIV, emphasis added).

Therefore every time we allow circumstances to overrule the word of God, we are denying our true citizenship. At that moment we begin to walk in unbelief - just as the Israelites did upon hearing the reports from the men they sent in to spy out the promised land. We are then no different than they were as we are overcome by unbelief.

I used to believe that the King James Bible term "carnal Christian" meant those who live in blatant sin; those who live immoral lives. But I have come to broaden my concept of "carnal Christian" to include those of us who fully depend on what we see, hear, feel, smell or taste. Carnal Christians are those of us who allow our carnal senses to persuade us to believe circumstances rather than God's word.

Let me give two examples to illustrate what I am saying. Suppose we have become estranged from a member of our family, a spouse, parent or child. Even though we are miserable, we don't know how to fix the relationship. Our prayers seem to go no farther than the ceiling. In fact, we are so discouraged about that broken relationship that we don't even pray. Circumstances will then say, "Look at this mess with so-and-so. These things shouldn't happen to a Christian. God doesn't love

you. In fact, God has forsaken you!"

At that point we have two choices: 1) If we believe circumstances we will say, "Yes, that's right. God has forsaken me." or 2), we can **act in faith** and say, "Oh yes, God does love me! **The Bible says**, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." (Heb 13:5 NIV).

Or another example: You have lost your job, the car is broken, the bills are overdue and there is no money... worse yet, your health is failing. Again circumstances will say: "This is the end. You have real, tangible needs. They will never be met. You can't even work. You've got real problems this time. God isn't going to do anything for you." If we choose to believe circumstances, we lose -- we give up in despair. But if we choose to **act in faith** we shout, "...my God will meet all [my] needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus."! (Phil 4:19 NIV). Then we look circumstances in the face and say, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength." (Phil 4:13 NIV).

Carolyn came home from her office one day several years ago and told me of a placard she saw in another attorney's office. It read:

REALITY HAS BEEN DETERMINED TO BE THE MAJOR CAUSE OF DEPRESSION.

Though there is humor in this statement, it has a distinct ring of truth. Circumstances are the reality of this world. If we choose to believe them, then we can and probably will become depressed. If we choose to remain, live and act in the natural realm, we will certainly be defeated. But God's word translates us over this "reality." God's word is **supernatural**. It has power to overcome the world's circumstances. God's word is not bound by circumstances. It is not subject to the rules created by circumstances.

The World is Controlled by Satan

Remember, the Bible says, "We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one." (1 Jn 5:19 NIV). As Christians we often forget that this world, as it exists today, actually belongs to Satan. Circumstances are of the world, therefore they can be Satan's tools - tools to be used against us. So naturally Satan will attempt to use circumstances as a major weapon to defeat us. But, we must remember that "...greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world" (1 Jn 4:4 KJV).

The Transition from Circumstance Rule to Faith Rule

Now that we have examined the seeming conflict in our lives between circumstances and our faith in God's word, the key question must be asked: How can we transition from allowing circumstances to rule over us to having our faith rule over us? I believe the answer is simple -- not easy, but simple. **WE MUST ENGAGE OUR WILL**. We must learn to exercise our will power to superimpose the word of God over and into every set of circumstances. This is the key. We are given our instructions in Paul's letter to the Corinthians: "We demolish

arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." (2 Cor 10:4-5 NIV). Here Paul is telling us what we must do. By an act of our will we must choose to believe and obey the word of God even against seemingly undefeatable facts. "[God's] word is truth." (Jn 17:17). It is by superimposing God's word and walking by faith in this everlasting truth that we can transition from having circumstances control us to having our lives controlled and sustained by God's word.

Please note that we are not trying to put forth a "formula for successful living" This is not a technique that you can learn in some weekend seminar. This is simply standing on the truth as contained in God's word. We never need to hype God's truth. We simply need to incorporate it into our beings and let it dominate our minds and emotions.

As part of this process, we must develop within ourselves the ability to always believe God's word. This is especially true when our human mind tells us that God's word cannot possibly come to pass. We must train our minds and spirits to accept without question the word of God, both in its written and spoken forms. Fourteen years ago God spoke a rhema to me regarding the salvation of someone dear to me. Every day I thank God for His word and thank Him for saving this person...even though circumstances loudly proclaim that it shall never be so. God, who cannot lie, has spoken these words to me. I believe them. I exercise my will daily to affirm this truth. God has spoken it.

We Must Know God's Word

Obviously, in order for us to stand on God's word we must know His word. It is important for us to understand the power contained in knowing the written word of God, the Bible. Every time Satan tempted Jesus, He overcame Satan with Scripture. Again and again Jesus answered Satan's temptations with, "It is written..." (See Luke 4). It may sound irreligious to say this but suppose Jesus hadn't known Scripture? By what means then could He have overcome Satan? Without carrying this thought too far, obviously, if Scripture was powerful enough for Jesus to defeat Satan himself, it certainly is powerful enough for the rest of us to defeat circumstances.

When God's word enters our spirit, it creates faith in us. The Bible says, "...faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." (Rom 10:17 KJV). In fact, the more of the Bible we have in us, the easier it is for the Lord to speak to us. It is absolutely essential for us to be full of the Scripture and to keep our ears open to hear God speak, however He chooses, in order for our faith to grow.

Helpful Hints

Let me list three simple but helpful tools that we are all already familiar with but which may be good to review as a reminder.

1. Daily Bible Study - We must read and study God's word every day. This daily reading and absorbing of the word is absolutely necessary if we are going to have the reservoir of His word ready to use when we need it. It is part of our faith

building.

2. Memorize Scripture - We must memorize God's word. I know memorizing Scripture is hard for some of us. But the rewards far outweigh any hardship we experience in our memorizing process. Once we have verses memorized, we have them and we can call upon them anytime, day or night. I cannot overemphasize the benefits of memorizing Scripture.

3. Speak God's Word - We must declare the word of God aloud. I find that it is very helpful for me to daily repeat aloud the word of God. I like to state over and over again the truth of God's word. If it is from Scripture, I quote the Scripture. If it is a rhema I have received, I restate the rhema. Sometimes, when I am under duress regarding a given matter, I will quote the word of God aloud three times; once for myself, once for God, and once for the devil. I want Satan to know that I believe God's word.

The Bible exhorts us to learn the Scripture, to memorize it, and to meditate upon it. In short, we are to saturate our minds and spirits in the word of God. Reading it daily, memorizing it, and speaking it aloud are all effective tools in our efforts to develop a strong faith in God's word.

We Must Turn Loose of the World

The Apostle John stated it this way:

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world--the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does--comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever. (1 Jn 2:15-17 NIV).

We previously noted the problem of depending on the world and its system. Here John is taking the thought further. Depending on the world is one thing; **loving** the world is quite another. As long as we look to the things of this world for our happiness, we will be unstable. All things of this world pass away with time. Only our citizenship in Heaven is eternal. If we are to transition from allowing circumstances to rule over us, we cannot love the world or anything in it. We must hold all in this world loosely...ready to turn loose at any time.

Paul tells us, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will." (Rom 12:2 NIV). This Scripture directs us to reject the patterns of this world. It also tells us to exercise our will toward the goal of a renewed mind. It is this renewed mind that will be able to test and know what God's perfect will is for each of us in all circumstances!

A humorous story is told of a man who was hiking on a steep mountain trail. At one point where the mountain was very steep he lost his footing and began to fall down the face of a cliff. Frantically his hands grasped a large tree root protruding out from the rock. Looking down he saw certain death awaited him should he fall. Looking up he saw no humanly means of

recovering himself.

In his desperation he began to shout, "God! Please help me! God! Please help me!" Shortly a voice came back that said, "Turn loose." Looking down, the desperate man briefly considered the ramifications of the instruction given him. Looking up again, he loudly asked, "Is there anyone else up there?"

I think we often regard God's instructions the same way. Sometimes God is shaking us mightily, trying to loosen our grip on the world. We, as the man in our story, are quite unwilling to let go of the world. If we are ever going to rise in victory over circumstances we must turn loose of the world. Remember, we are in the world but we are not and should never be a part of it.

God's Power and God's Purposes

Let us now examine the wonderful story of the three men of God who were thrown into Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace. The story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego's courage and trust in the Lord sets an example for us all. In the dialogue with Nebuchadnezzar before they were thrown into the furnace they revealed a liberating truth:

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up." (Dan 3:16-18 NIV).

In this statement to the king we see that these men had faith in two things: 1) **God's power** to deliver, and 2) **God's purpose** in the matter. They said, "...the God we serve *is able*..." - faith in God's power to deliver them from the fire. But they continued, "...if he does not..." they still would not yield - faith in God's purpose.

I believe for most of us, it is easier to believe in God's power to deliver us than it is to believe in God's higher purposes if He leaves us in our circumstances. For most of us, we stand in awe of God's mighty power to heal, to cause miracles, to control our weather, to generate vast sums of money when needed, and so on. We have all heard and believed wonderful, faith building stories about God's power. Indeed, I believe all of us have to some degree experienced God's power in our Christian faith.

But what about faith in God's purposes when there is no deliverance? God is trying to bring every believer to the point of being able to declare honestly, "I don't have any idea why I am going through this. But this I know: God loves me and He is accomplishing His purposes in my life through these circumstances and I praise Him for it!"

How wonderful when we can develop the same attitude as our three heroes of faith and say, "I believe God can deliver me...but if He does not, I am prepared to go through this trial believing He has a higher purpose in it. I believe this to be so even though I cannot see or understand any higher purpose right

now."

Indeed, God has told us we are not able to understand His purposes in every situation. Note what God says about His ways:

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Is 55:8,9 NIV).

This attitude of mind and heart takes great trust and confidence in God. It means putting our own perceptions and thoughts aside and having greater confidence in our Lord Jesus Christ than we have in our own minds. For most of us, this takes a lot of practice. It does not come easily. But the peace and rest which follows such declarations are more than worth it. It is that peace which truly surpasses our human understanding which Paul speaks about in Philippians 4:7.

Let us continue our study of the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Because these men of faith went through the burning furnace they experienced two very powerful benefits: 1) the cords with which they were bound were burned - nothing else was burned but the cords, and 2) one who was a "son of the gods" (I believe it was Jesus) was present and very near them in the midst of their trial! (Dan 3:25).

Often we are bound by fears, worries or pending doom. The Lord, in His infinite wisdom, sees the end from the beginning. He then allows us to go through the fire in order to set us free of our bondage.

The Scripture doesn't indicate whether the three men were aware of the presence of the fourth Person in the flame with them. If they were aware of Him, how wonderful. But I suspect they were not. Either way, this should be a comforting lesson for us. When we are in the midst of a fiery trial, often our senses tell us that Jesus is on the other side of the world and unconcerned about our trial. Not so. Jesus is very near us in the midst of our trying circumstances...whether we "feel" His

presence or not, **He is there!** Then there are those wonderful times when we know and can actually feel that Jesus is near and He is comforting us as we endeavor to serve Him in the midst of our trials. These are precious moments.

Conclusion

I am not saying that we, by faith, can dissolve all circumstances. But by faith we can live in the victory of God's word in the midst of our circumstances. Sometimes that is more important to God than our being delivered out of them. Therefore, dear reader, when you find yourself in the midst of unpleasant, pressing, or even life-threatening circumstances, take courage. Honestly state your fears to the Lord in prayer. He knows about them anyway. Reaffirm aloud your total commitment to Him. Grant Him your permission to do as He sees best - regardless of how it may affect you. Ask Him for His peace to see you through. Then boldly face your circumstances one step at a time. Know that the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego will be present with you.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight. (Pro 3:5-6 NIV).

Let us not be as the people of Israel were when they looked over into the promised land. Let us not allow circumstances to produce unbelief in our hearts thereby denying the promises from God's word. It is not important that we feel the presence of God; it is only important that we believe His word as truth and **act on it**.

Do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded! (Heb 10:35 NIV).

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