

How to benefit from hard times

Back in 2008, in the midst of the depressed real estate market, I heard a “get-rich-quick” advertisement on the radio.

You know the type of ad I’m talking about: *“work out of your home and in no time at all you’ll be making five thousand dollars a week!”*

I’m not sure exactly how this particular scheme was supposed to work, but it somehow hinged on the number of real estate loans that were being foreclosed.

The pitchman cheerfully proclaimed that the market was flooded with foreclosures and there was a neat new way you could capitalize on them to get rich.

Yeah buddy! The whole pitch, of course, was based on the proposition that getting rich was the key to happiness.

And that is an idea that’s been around for a long, long time.

There’s a brand of Christianity that tries to capitalize on the appeal of this idea.

Preachers who subscribe to it promise—or at least imply—that if you become a Christian, health and wealth will soon be yours.

Sometimes this is called the “prosperity gospel.”

“Name it and claim it and it and you can have it in the name of the Lord.”

Get Jesus in your life and you’ll get a promotion at work, peace will descend on your marriage and your children will all be perfect!

The message is usually accompanied by a testimony from someone describing how well it has worked in their life.

The story usually goes something like this: *“I used to be a bum who beat his wife and abused his kids; now I’m a successful businessman and my wife and kids are so happy they smile in their sleep!”*

You might call this “good times” Christianity.

You might also call it “baloney.”

Jesus never said, *“Follow me and you will prosper!”*

Quite the opposite, he said *“in this world you will have troubles,”* and *“all men will hate you because of me,”* and *“...to love the world is to hate God.”*

Instead of advising his disciples to look forward to health and wealth, he urged them to “count the cost.”

Jesus didn't say that he came to help us *enjoy* the world; he said that he came to help us *overcome* the world.

C. S. Lewis once said that God wasn't interested in making us happy; he was interested in helping us grow up.

He didn't promise us good times *but he did promise that we could benefit from hard times--* not from other people's hardships, but from our own.

That he would work in us during our hard times to nourish our faith, enrich our relationship with him, and produce in us a harvest of righteousness and peace.

That's the message in our Epistle lesson for today—the *Letter to the Hebrews*.

The passage begins with a quotation from the *Book of Proverbs*: “*my son do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.*”

In Christ we are God's children and he is our Father.

After Jesus had risen from the dead, he said to Mary: “*go...to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my father and your father, to my God and your God.'*”

When we have difficulty understanding why God allows hardships to come into our lives, it helps to consider it from the perspective of a child's relationship with his father.

Now I don't know about you, but when I was a kid and got into trouble, I wasn't very interested in **why** my dad was punishing me for it.

I wasn't interested in *understanding* punishment; i was interested in *avoiding* it.

And if I couldn't avoid it, I just wanted to get it over with as soon as possible.

On those few occasions when my dad tried to explain to me **why** I was being punished, I can't say that I derived any comfort out of his explanation.

“Oh I see, Dad; now that I understand why you're doing this, go right ahead and ground me. It's the appropriate thing for you to do and I'm looking forward to learning from it!”

Have you ever met a parent who believes that you should renounce all forms of discipline and simply try to **persuade** your children to be good?

That if you just explain to your child in a reasonable way what he should and shouldn't do, your child will follow your directions because he will be convinced by your logic.

Once he *understands* the reasons behind your rules, he will love them and obey them. Uh huh. You bet.

It would work perfectly, of course, if children were perfectly reasonable creatures, but, unfortunately, they are not.

Like their parents, they have rebellious spirits and they want what they want when they want it.

And what they want may or may not comport with your rules, however reasonable those rules may be.

Children want to have their own way and reasonable explanations of why they can't have their way are poor substitutes for having it.

And we adults are no different in how we relate to our heavenly father, We know what's good for us because our father has told us very plainly what is good for us.

It's called the Ten Commandments.

And we agree with him because we know that the Ten Commandments are right and reasonable.

But it's funny how what is right and reasonable can fly out the window when we're tempted to break one of the commandments, isn't it?

We want to have our way, even when our way isn't God's way.

So God disciplines us, his children, by allowing us to experience the hardships that sin brings down upon us.

Not just our own sins—but other people's sins as well.

With our collective sins we human beings hurt ourselves, we hurt each other, and we harm creation.

But thanks be to God, he doesn't leave us wallowing in the ruinous consequences of our sins; instead, he offers us a way to profit from the hardships sin brings down upon us,

"Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons."

Notice: he doesn't say that the specific hardships that come into our lives are punishments for specific sins that we have committed.

We sin collectively and we suffer collectively: we're all in this together.

What he is saying is: learn to **think of hardship as discipline**—as a painful experience from which we can grow and benefit.

“Later on [he promises] it [can produce] a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”

Now this is a remarkable promise and it extends divine grace to those who can accept it.

We are being offered what Luther called “a joyous exchange”: the opportunity to transmute lead to gold, to transform bane to blessing, to convert law to Gospel.

Just consider—there is one commodity that is freely available to us all: it’s called hardship.

There is no need for a broker; there is plenty of the stuff to go around.

In fact, there is an endless supply!

At first hardship seems worse than worthless to us—like the oil that Jed Clampett, the original Beverly hillbilly, discovered on his property and called a *“bunch of foul-smelling black ooze you couldn’t eat even with Granny’s fine biscuits!”*

He didn’t realize that what he had discovered was black gold.

And like black gold, even though the hardship and suffering that come into our lives seems worthless and foul, they have a priceless value *if we will allow ourselves to be trained by them!*

To understand this requires a willingness to look for the Lord’s hand in everything that happens to us—good and bad.

And admittedly, this is not easy.

We are inclined to thank the Lord for the good things that come our way and attribute the bad things to either satan or bad luck.

Like children we are delighted with how things go on our birthday but angry when things don’t go as we please.

But this attitude limits our understanding of how much the Lord loves us.

As we sing in one of our hymns, “God works in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform.”

Or in another hymn: *“judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust him for his grace; behind a frowning providence faith sees a smiling face.”*

Once again, God isn't as interested in making us happy; he is interested in helping us grow up.

This idea is not unique to the *Book of Hebrews*; it appears several other places in the scriptures as well.

The psalmist writes, "...*those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy.*"

St. Paul says, "*We rejoice in our sufferings because suffering produces perseverance, perseverance, character, and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us....*"

Once again in Hebrews, "*God disciplines us for our good that we may share in his holiness.*"

Hardship and suffering are like a refiner's fire in the life of a Christian: they burn away the dross and reveal the pure metal.

I grew up in a lead-mining town and where there are metal mines there are always smelters.

The metal ore which has been mined comes encased in rock and dirt which is called the dross.

It is fed into a high temperature furnace called a smelter which burns away the dross and purifies the metal.

What is the dross in our lives? It's the infatuation we have with the material pleasures of this world.

And what is the purified metal? It's our faith, our hope and our love for God and our neighbor.

This is the harvest of righteousness which the lord strives to bring forth in his children as they grow up under his instruction.

Now no one is saying that it's easy to grow up.

To love and trust your father even when he disciplines you and withholds things you crave is not easy.

In the same way, it's not always easy to love and trust your heavenly Father when he sends suffering into your life.

It's easier to hate suffering and hardship and resent the one who makes you suffer.

"Life stinks and then you die"—says the bumper sticker.

There are times we can be tempted to fall into that way of thinking.

But it's the primrose path to bitterness, despair and hardness of heart and it can lead you to lose your faith and be eternally separated from your heavenly father.

Jesus called it., "...the wide gate and broad path that lead to destruction."

On the other hand, there is that trust in God's grace that is called **faith**.

Faith that "*...in all things, God works for the good of those who love him and have been called according to his purpose.*"

Jesus called it "...the small gate and the narrow path that leads to life."

Through faith we can benefit from hard times.

And the light at the end of the tunnel will seem all the brighter after we have walked for a while in the dark.

God has promised it and God cannot lie.

Amen.

