

LIFE IS DIFFICULT

Expecting & Embracing Trouble

Unbreakable Series (Part 6)

Texts: John 16:33; Philippians 3:7-14

One of the great benefits of being a disciple of Jesus is the practical instruction we find in the Bible on how to make the most of this life. Given the withering effect the pace and pressures of life today can have on our spiritual, relational, and physical health, we value this kind of help, don't we? That's why, over the past several weeks, we've been studying what the scriptures say about how to shape communities and people that are unusually resilient in the face of these forces.

If you've missed any of the messages in this series you can find them at our literature stations, online, or through the Christ Church of Oak Brook smartphone app. Today, I want to close out this series by considering one further strand you might intentionally weave into the cord of community and character in your life that can make them more nearly UNBREAKABLE.

Face Our "MEbola"

One of the most memorable lines I have ever read occurs in the opening paragraph of M. Scott Peck's perennial best-seller, *The Road Less Traveled*. In fact, the line IS the entire first paragraph of the book. The famous Harvard psychologist and eventual Christian simply wrote: "Life is difficult." Full stop. New paragraph.

Now, I recognize that for some of you listening today, those words are hardly a revelation. You've been through punishing circumstances. You've endured terrible losses and tragedies. You've been confronted daily with news of violence and illness and conflict and confusion. But there is still a sense in which you can be aware of all this and still not get the import of those words as Scott Peck means them.

Dr. Peck writes: "Most do not fully see this truth, that life is difficult. They moan more or less incessantly, noisily or subtly, about the enormity of their problems, their burdens, and their difficulties -- as if life were generally easy, as if life should be easy. They voice their belief... that their difficulties represent a unique kind of affliction that should not be and that has somehow been especially visited upon them, or else upon their families, their tribe, their class... nation...[or] race and not upon others."

It's easy to develop this mindset, if we're not careful. There is a sort of "MEbola" disease going around. It's chief symptom is the frequency with which

the patient asks, "Why ME?" Why is MY life so hard? Why am I facing this obstacle or that struggle? Why am I being exhausted or mistreated? Why isn't life working better or easier for ME?

Feeding this condition are various "idea germs" sneezed out by the society around us. If there truly was a loving God on the throne of the Universe, we or our loved ones would not be in pain. If such-and-such a party were in power then our problems would go away. If you had the right investment advisor your future would not be difficult. If you drank this beer, or drove this car, or wore this makeup, or applied this strategy with your spouse or kids, then life could finally get easy. Have you heard these messages?

Consider the Underlying Conditions

But here is the truth. By its present nature, life IS difficult. When I was a young man, I learned to accept this. I'd lost my maternal grandfather to suicide and my paternal grandfather to a premature heart attack. My young uncle had been killed by bank robbers and an older uncle crippled by a stroke. Before I left high school, our family was torn apart by divorce and our house ravaged by a great fire. Before too long I'd see my mom get cancer and my cousin murdered. I hated what was happening but, as an atheist, I wasn't surprised by it. Left to their own devices, people were just better-dressed animals, living by tooth and claw. The universe was a cold, dark, deadly place in which everything was subject to decay. Of course, life was difficult. The really intriguing question to me was why is there any light and love and laughter and life at all? Why and how does this grace keep reasserting itself amidst the gravity of life?

I eventually came to believe that the source of this grace was the GOD the Bible describes and a larger view began to open up for me. The creation we live in has been broken by sin. Humanity's willful separation from the founder and fount of all light, love, and life has had disastrous consequences that have affected the physical, social, and moral health of this world. There is a level of difficulty to life now that was not so in the beginning. But here's the good news: God is going to make it "not so" again. He feels the giant agony of this difficult life; he took it onto and into himself upon the Cross. But God plans to restore his creation to its original glory. And he has given us a foretaste of that ultimate redemption in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Do I hear an "Amen!?"

The brilliant Russian, Fyodor Dostoevsky, summed it up this way: "I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage... [I believe] that in the world's finale, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, of all the blood that they've shed; that it will make it not only possible to forgive but to justify all that has happened."

I recognize that this may seem like cold comfort to you, if you are experiencing agonies right now. Tim Keller reminds us of C.S. Lewis' words on this subject: "[The atheists] say of temporal suffering, 'No future bliss can make up for it.'" But this is only because their minds cannot yet imagine the wonder, "that Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even that agony into a glory." Jesus put it this way to his disciples in John chapter 16: **"I am telling you these things, so that in me you may have peace."** And, then, the really important part: **"In this world you will have troubles. But take heart. I have overcome the world."** (John 16:33).

Shift Your Focus From Your Calamities to Christ

One of the characteristics of Christian people, families, or communities that are unusually resilient in the face of life's pains and pressures is that they take Jesus at his word here. They know they should EXPECT TROUBLES, because life in a broken world is going to be difficult. As the legendary rock band, R.E.M., puts it in one of their most famous songs: "Everybody hurts sometimes." There are going to be periods "when you feel like you're alone... and the days and nights are long..." yet you've got to "hold on," for Christ overcomes all that is wrong.

Remind the people in your circle of this truth, will you? Help them remember, you may be bullied in school... You may be cut from the team... You may be dumped by your heart throb... You may not get into the college or company you wanted... You may struggle to find your way... You may face financial reversals and attacks from enemies and even the shadow of death, but **"in me,"** says Jesus, **"you may have peace."**

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" asks St. Paul, no stranger to difficulties himself. **"Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine? Shall nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we will be more than conquerors through him who loves us."** (Romans 8:35,37)

But here's a fascinating irony and, again, Scott Peck's words are helpful: "Once we truly know that life is difficult -- once we truly understand and accept it -- then life is no longer [so] difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life IS difficult no longer matters" – quite so much. What begins to matter more is what one plans to do with that pain.

Hear me clearly on this: The most unbreakable individuals and groups don't just learn to expect troubles; they learn to EMBRACE TROUBLES. I'm not saying they become masochists – people who love pain. I'm saying is that the most resilient people in this world are those who make the decision to view their difficulties not as obstacles to a meaningful life; but as opportunities to enter into a deeper life.

I think of Judy, a woman I knew in San Diego with whom I was privileged to walk to the grave. Toward the close of her battle with stage four cancer, I sat with Judy and two of her kids and asked: "Judy, aren't there times when you just want to shake your fist at heaven and rage, 'Why me!'" "Honestly, Dan," she said, "Those times have been few and far between. Mostly, I think, "Why NOT me?" Why would all suffering bypass me?" Then Judy looked with great love at her young adult kids and said: "I mainly think now about how this illness has brought me so much closer to God and these boys. I think how it has stripped me of a lot of pettiness and stupid priorities. I see how it has opened my heart to others who suffer. Would I want cancer again? The answer is no. But would I want to give up what God has taught me about loving and living in the process of my dying? Never."

Friends, you and I can't choose whether or not we will suffer in this life; but we can choose whether we will let our trials make us bitter or better... whether they will become a barrier to intimacy with God and others or a bridge to a connection that might happen no other way. In his letter to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul says that he would be willing to lose everything he once held dear in this life if that's what it took to really know Christ and to become like him (Philippians 3:7-9a). Remember Paul and my friend Judy and ask yourself: What am I willing to lose for the sake of Christ and his work in and through me?

It is possible that some of the difficulties you or a member of your family or friendship circle are going through right now are just the anguish of a world that God is waiting to redeem with his overcoming power. Maybe you shouldn't over think them. Perhaps God's word to you or through you to someone else is just: Hold on. Remain in me. For I am with you till the day when all things become new.

But it is also possible, that God's message to you or through you is something else. When Michelangelo was asked how he managed to fashion perhaps his greatest masterpiece, the statue of David, the master artist gently replied: "It's simple. I just chipped away everything that wasn't David." Commenting on this analogy, C.S. Lewis once wondered if trials and tribulations were not sometimes God's chisel. Though the blows of the chisel hurt for a season, perhaps they come to carve out a humility that makes you more available to God... to create a compassion that moves you toward the needs of others... to shape in you a character more and more like Christ. In short, what if your life is difficult in order to make you a masterpiece?

Series Conclusion

We're out of time for today, so let me summarize what we've learned in this series and send you on your way. There are SIX STRANDS God calls us to weave intentionally into our lives with one another. God calls us to commit

deeply to each other, to encourage one another, to stop-look-and-listen to each other, to spend time together, to seek communion with him together, and to both expect the pain and embrace the potential of life's troubles together.

Doing all this seems like trouble in itself, doesn't it? So why might you pour more of yourself into that sort of difficult engagement with your family, your small group, your circle of friends or team in coming days? Here's the answer: Because God will use these practices to make the cord of those communities and the character of the people they produce, nearly UNBREAKABLE.

PAGE 1

PAGE 5

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M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth* (New York: Touchstone, 1978), p.15

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamozov*, chapter 34.

C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1946), p. 64.