

When Life is Hard
July 17, 2016

The last few weeks have been tough on America. For some it was a wake up call that things have not improved as much as they thought. For others it was proof that things haven't improved much at all.

Many of us are far removed from the experiences of those most affected. I cannot speak to their experience. I can only speak to my own experience. I cannot speak to these things as a black man. I cannot speak to these things as a law enforcement officer. I cannot speak to these things as a family member or coworker of those who died.

As an American I am grieved by what has taken place. My thoughts and feelings are such a jumble that I don't know what to say. I don't know what to do. I don't know how to react, or how to help. Many white Americans are feeling like that this week. Many Christians are feeling like that this week.

How should we respond to such tragedies? Let me suggest several steps to take as a follower of Jesus Christ.

Go to God with your grief. Tell God of your grief, your anger, your fear. Lay it all out before God.

When you were a kid and there was a storm and you were afraid. What did you do? You went to your parents. You felt safer with them. They had experience and wisdom to understand what was happening and how to respond.

As Christians, we need to have such a relationship to God that when something happens we automatically go to Him. That is where we will find comfort. That is where we will feel secure. That is where we will find direction for dealing. That is where we will find peace. Paul writes of this peace from God.

Philippians 4:6-7 (NIV) Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Take your grief to God. Talk out all your feelings out to God. Tell Him you need His peace. Pray until He gives you this peace. Other than sharing your grief with God, what should you pray?

In prayer, recount your blessings from God.

One of the patterns of prayer we see in the Bible is to recount the blessings of God. David, Stephen, and others do this in their prayers or conversations with others. The Psalmist encourages us to do this.

Psalms 105:5 (NIV) Remember the wonders he has done...

One of the subjects of prayer are the things you have to be thankful for. Certainly there are current blessings. But you can also make it a point to remember how God has blessed you in the past. You can recount to God the past blessings He has given you, showing that you have not forgotten.

When I do this I recount how God gave me Christian parents who taught me at home and took me to church. I recount the three godly Christian men other than my father, who taught me in Sunday School. I recount the early pastors God used to preach the gospel to me. I recount the day I became a follower of Jesus, my baptism, and other experiences. I remember the day I met my wife at Seminary. How accidental it seems now. We ended up sitting across from each other in Advanced Greek class. What if she had sat on the other side of the room? But God brought us together.

I recount how God brought us to this church. I recount the blessing you have been to us and the love you have shown my family.

As you go to God in prayer, recount your blessings. Prove the faithfulness of God in your life. Give thanks again. This will encourage you.

In prayer, reaffirm your faith in God. Paul gives us the example here in his letter to Timothy. He affirms to Timothy why he is confident, even when life has become hard. He affirms his faith in God.

2 Timothy 1:11-12 (NIV) And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. That is why I am suffering (in jail) as I am. Yet I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day.

Paul was living his life by faith. He was firm in his faith in God, in Jesus as Savior, in the character of God, and in the promises of God. Paul believed. And he re-affirmed his belief in his letter to Timothy.

I encourage you to reaffirm your faith in God as you pray. We have sung songs today that affirm our faith in the one we believe in. We are standing on His promises. We believe, and we know Jesus is the Holy one of God. We can sing these to each other. We can sing them to God. I encourage you to make it a regular part of your prayers that you reaffirm what it is you believe.

I hope you remember the sermon series of last winter called FOUNDATIONS. I presented to you what are the foundational truths of the Christian faith. It is these basic truths that we must come back to when life is hard. They give us a true picture of the world. You won't get that picture from the national media. That is why we need to remind ourselves of these truths.

I printed up, and had laminated, some cards as reminders to you of these basic truths. I have been giving them out through home visits. Some of you are hard to catch at home. So today is a good day to give the rest out if you do not have one. I hope that you will use them regularly, not just when life is hard.

Remind yourself that God is real. Reaffirm to Him your faith in Him.

Remind yourself that God is the creator of all life. Remind yourself that you are a sinner.
Remind yourself that God sent Jesus to be the Savior you need.
Remind yourself that Jesus made you for Himself.
Remind yourself that Jesus is going to one day judge all sin.

In reminding yourself of these truths you will remember where you are in history. Our history as Christians is not centered on America. Our story is not America's story. Our story is Jesus' story. Our history is centered on Jesus.

It appears that we are living in a time between the birth of America and some future time when all these current problems might be solved permanently. There is no guarantee that this will ever occur.

But that is not where we are living. We are living between the first coming of Jesus and the second coming of Jesus. When Jesus returns, HE will fix the earth as best it can be fixed. Our place in history is centered on Jesus and what He will do.

In prayer, reaffirm your faith in Him.

In prayer, reaffirm your hope in the return of Jesus.

Titus 2:11-13 (NIV) For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope--the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ,

As I said, we are living in the time between the first and second comings of Jesus. When Jesus returns, He will set things right in America and everywhere else.

We are foolish to think that America will ever be as great as we want it to be. Americans too proudly think that with enough time and education we can make America a good nation through and through. The problem with America is that it will always be made up of sinners. We keep hoping that the world will change, that America will change, that people will change. But time and education will not fix the human heart. The world will not get set right before Jesus returns. Our hope must be in His return.

Go to God in prayer. Give your grief to God. Recount how He has blessed you. Reaffirm your faith in Him. Reaffirm your hope of Jesus' return. Pray and keep praying until God gives you His peace. This is the promise Paul wrote of. Then you will be ready to take action. Then you will be ready to respond to a hurting America.

Paul reminds us of the three key Christian virtues:

1 Corinthians 13:13 (NIV) And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

In God's peace, love others.

After God gives you His peace, you will be ready to respond to America's situation with God's love. God will use your acts of love to make things better. With actions of love you can come alongside the black community and the law enforcement community.

One pastor postponed last Sunday's sermon. He invited two black men, both involved in Christian ministry and asked them questions about the situation in America so that He and his church, of mostly white people, could react with love.

He asked them first if they were afraid of police officers. He asked them about their personal experiences. He asked them how he could draw closer emotionally to the situation of the black community. He asked what the Black community needed to hear from him in support. They had a very candid dialogue about these questions.

Friday morning I had arranged to get my oil changed. While waiting for the job to be finished, a black man entered the waiting room. He was there to deliver fresh uniforms for the mechanics. I took that opportunity to ask him if he was afraid of police officers. It opened a conversation about some of what has happened, and his perceptions of them.

I encourage you to do that as you have opportunity this week. I am a white man with no personal experience of racial prejudice. I can only begin to understand by getting to know those who have experienced it and expressing God's love to them in that.

As Christians, we must introduce God's love, through us, into the American problems. We can only do that one act at a time, usually one-on-one. We can live out God's love to each other.

It is that love we need this week in Vacation Bible School. We must smile that love. We must speak that love. We must learn names. We must learn faces. We must serve others with that love this week. We aren't here this week to just teach the Bible or demonstrate crafts or provide snacks or chaperone groups of children. We are here this week to love every other person with the love of Jesus and share the Gospel. Only God's love in Jesus Christ has a hope of really changing the world, including America.

Prepare yourself today for serving others this week.

Invitation

We believe, and we know that Jesus is the Holy One of God. Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Savior of all mankind... if.

Jesus will save you from your sins... if you will receive Him as your Savior. Jesus died for all the sins of everyone in history. But He does not force himself as Savior on anyone. You must admit your sin, admit your need for a Savior, and personally receive Him as YOUR Savior. He invites you to do so today.

Receive Him as your Savior, and turn your life over to Him as your Lord, and His death will then apply to your sins. Do it today. Do it now.