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© I. Chris Imoisili, E-mail: imoisilic@hotmail.com; imoisilic@gmail.com
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THIS HARDSHIP SHALL PASS!

Today's Text: Jeremiah Chaps 24, 25

Extracts:

1. Again the word of the Lord came to me, saying, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: 'Like these good figs, so will I acknowledge those who are carried away captive from Judah, whom I have sent out of this place for their own good, into the land of the Chaldeans [Jer. 24: 4,5]"
2. Therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts, "This whole land shall be a desolation and an astonishment, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. Then, it will come to pass, when seventy years are completed, that I will punish the king of Babylon, and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity" [Jer. 25: 8, 11,12]

From 16 July 2006, California baked under a heat wave, with temperatures soaring over 100 degrees (Fahrenheit).¹ Farmers who grew peaches, plums, nectarines and walnuts in the Central Valley watched helplessly as their crops wilted and died in the sizzling heat. People found their homes and even the open spaces too hot for comfort. Heat-related deaths mounted as millions of customers lost power supply for over a week in some cases. According to experts, the heat wave was the kind that occurred only every 20 to 25 years. Then, just when fears were mounting for worse times ahead, there was a drop in temperatures as it rained in some parts of the state and clouds covered the clear sky. Suddenly, children and their parents poured into the playgrounds and play fields to enjoy an outside outing for the first time in weeks!

In today's Bible text, the children of Israel faced looming hardship. They would be captured and carried into exile in Babylon for a period of seventy years. God promised them that their hardship would pass, but not for every one of them. Some of us are passing through hard times right now, such as wars, natural disasters, unemployment, illness, troubled relationships, barrenness and debt burden. We may have been driven to a point where we wonder if the hardship would ever end. Most residents of California survived the heat wave but some died. Some of the children of Israel of old survived their exile. God is promising you today that your hardship shall also pass but only on His terms. Let us find out in today's lesson what it will take.

¹ Based on "California temperatures drop but death toll soars,"
www.cnn.com/2006/WEATHER/07/29/heat.wave.ap/index.html

1. Hardship hurts!

In the Middle East, a mother is picking up what is left of her bombed out belongings while clutching an injured baby. She has just escaped instant death in the fight between Israel and Hezbollah. At a branch of a big American bank on a busy Los Angeles street, a blind man is sitting on a wheel chair close to an ATM machine, hoping that a good Samaritan would drop some notes into his eager and hunger-withered hands. In a court room somewhere, television cameras show a distraught man looking at his ex-wife in the dock on trial for drowning their five young children in a bath tub. In another news report, a grandmother is weeping profusely for causing a road accident in which her pretty seven year-old granddaughter lost her left arm. What is common to all these people? They have found themselves in *trying circumstances* that have caused them sorrow or worry. The dictionary calls their situation hardship.

We all pass through one form of hardship or the other. We may have experienced circumstances with all or some of the following characteristics:

a) *The situation is not getting better!*

We may find ourselves in a situation where things are getting worse instead of better, no matter all the effort that we are putting in. For example, our intensive job search is not producing positive results in that we are not even receiving interview invitations or job offers. Meanwhile, rent, credit card and other bills are mounting. Our illness may not be responding to treatment in spite of the huge bills that follow every consultation. The wayward daughter has not returned home in spite of intense prayers and fasting. There is a gnawing feeling that there could be no hope.

Take the case of Job [**Job Chaps 1-2**]. First, he lost his animals and servants. Next, all his seven sons and three daughters died. As if that was not enough, painful boils took over his whole body “from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head” [**2: 7**]. Here was the richest and greatest man in the then Eastern world reduced to a destitute state. Rather than get better, his situation got worse. His wife could no longer take it and she screamed at her husband, “Curse God and die!” [**2: 9**]. As the agony of Jesus got worse, culminating in His crucifixion on the cross, He cried out to His Father, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” [**Matt. 27: 46**].

b) *The duration may be unknown!*

If you know for how long your hardship will last, it may be easier to cope with it. For example, a pregnant mother knows that her ordeal will be over in nine months. A high school student knows that the course should be

over within five to six years, all things being equal. However, when you do not know how long the hardship will last and you have no control over it, you can feel much worse!

Until the crippled man met Jesus at the pool of Bethesda, he had been in that state for thirty-eight years! In each of those years, according to God's grace, an angel did come to stir the water of the pool and that man was outdone by other sick people who got to the pool before him and received their healing. In his own words, "I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; but while I am coming, another steps down before me" [Jn 5: 3-7]. If Jesus had not healed that man, he would have kept returning every year for an indeterminate time!

The uncertainty of duration can test a person's faith. The Psalmist writes, "Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall yet praise Him, the help of my countenance and my God" [Ps. 43: 5]. We sure need such assurances during trying times!

Clearly, hardship hurts, especially when we know that human help can only give us temporary relief. Let us study the story of the children of Israel and see if we can learn some lessons to help us to deal with our circumstances.

2. The hardship of captivity and exile

At the time of this story, some children of Israel had recently been carried into exile in Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar. They included Jeconiah, the king of Judah, the princes of Judah, and craftsmen and smiths [Jer. 24: 1]. Therefore, there was much uncertainty in the land. Fear and doubts gripped the people.

In response, God gave Jeremiah a sign. He showed the prophet two baskets of figs set before the temple of the Lord. One basket had good and ripe figs while the other had bad ones. The basket of good figs represented those who had been carried away captive from Judah into the land of the Chaldeans "for their own good" [vv. 2-5]. To this group of exiles, God promised that their hardship in Babylon would last for seventy years. After that, He would judge and punish the king of Babylon [Jer. 25: 11]. God promised to set His eyes on such people for their good and "I will bring them back to this land; I will build them and not pull them down; and I will plant them and not pluck them up." Much more, He would give them a heart to know Him as their God and they as His people that had returned "with their whole heart" [Jer. 24: 6-7].

The basket of bad figs, on the other hand, represented the incumbent king of Judah, Zedekiah, and "the residue of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who dwell in the land of Egypt." For this group, God promised to "deliver them to

trouble into all the kingdoms of the earth, *for their harm*, to be a reproach and a byword, a taunt and a curse” wherever He would drive them [vv. 8-10].

All along, Jeremiah had maintained through his prophecies that only those who agreed to go into exile in Babylon had heeded God’s word. The basket of good figs represented that group. On the other hand, false prophets, some priests like Pashhur and the kings had tortured and taunted Jeremiah for asking them to surrender without any fight to the king of Babylon. These were the ones who refused to go to exile but instead ran to Egypt or sought its help against Babylon. The basket of bad figs represented this group.

3. Lessons for us

From the forgoing, we learn that:

- Some hardships are good and some are bad;
- *Good hardships are planned by God for our own good; and*
- *Bad hardships are the outcomes of our own judgments and choices outside of the will of God*

Let us examine these conclusions in some more detail:

a) *Hardship as the training opportunity for God’s purpose!*

Even for small children learning to read and write, it is hard work! They have to follow a course of studies with so many drills and exercises until they master the subject. For professionals in law, medicine or the trades, the training ordeal is harder and longer. When God calls us as labourers into His vineyard, He first gives us an orientation course, to enable us to understand and respect the rules, regulations and requirements of divine calling. Just as an army recruit goes through rigorous drills and training in order to become a professional soldier, the true follower of Christ must also be trained, “that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier” [2 **Tim. 2: 4**]. Just as a good soldier is obedient [**Matt. 8: 9**] and devoted [**Acts 10: 7**], so also those called into God’s service must learn to obey and trust Him.

Jesus says that He is the true vine, we are the branches, and His Father is the vinedresser. What does God do to the branches that bear fruits? He prunes them so that they may “bear more fruit” [**Jn 15: 1, 5**]. Pruning is painful! Therefore, when God is preparing us for His work, He will take us through the wilderness of lack and want until we learn to trust and rely upon Him *absolutely!* For example, it took both David and Joseph about thirteen years each to come to the place of service to glorify God. Abraham had to be circumcised (without any anesthesia!) at the age of almost a hundred years of age before producing the child of promise,

Isaac! After his conversion on the road to Damascus, Paul had to spend three solitary years in Arabia, receiving divine guidance from the Lord, before joining the other disciples of Christ [**Gal. 1: 11-18**].

Even when we are already doing God's work, there is no promise of comfort. For example, during his missionary journeys, Paul received thirty-nine stripes five times and he was beaten with rods three times. Once, he was stoned and three times he was shipwrecked. He was imprisoned, robbed and hounded [**2 Cor. 11: 24-27**]. He did not have any respite from hardship until his death. Why do you think that you will be exempted?

b) *Hardship as a self-inflicted injury!*

A self-inflicted injury is the type that we bring on ourselves by our own *choices*. Examples are suicide and sexually transmitted diseases. In rare circumstances where medical insurance may cover self-inflicted injuries, the premiums are usually quite high, compared to other ailments. In like manner, many of us are in hardship because of what we have brought upon ourselves through disobedience and following the ways of the world.

The children of Israel persistently refused to listen to the word of God. Instead, they chose their own ways and weapons of war. As a result, God gave up on them. Here is how Jeremiah recorded it [**Jer. 25: 7**]:

“You have not listened to Me,” says the Lord, “that you might provoke Me to anger with the works of your hands to your own hurt.”

When you throw filth against the wind, you cannot escape the stench coming back at you? Therefore, it may hardly be your enemies that are pursuing you but self-inflicted injuries, such as unconfessed sins, an unforgiving spirit, human decisions based on self-aggrandizement and such-like things. That is why the word of God says that the way of the transgressor is hard [**Prov. 13: 15**].

4. Conclusion: this hardship shall pass!

You are now better equipped to tackle the hardship (if any) currently bothering you. For that purpose, you can use the following guidelines:

- Do a self-appraisal of your life

You are in the best position to know who you are “for what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him?” [**1 Cor. 2: 11**]. Which aspects of your life have you kept away from God's control

before now? What is it that you value more than God? Is it your work? Money? Sex? Self-worth? Social approval? What lie (s) are you trying so hard to hide whereas God sees everything, including your thoughts! Remember, only God can promote you [**Ps. 75: 6**].

- Own up for your faults!

The word of God says, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” [**1 Jn 1: 8-9**]. Do not hesitate to own up to God for your sins or to apologise to persons that you have offended. Forgive others even when they refuse to apologize to you! It is a mark of spiritual strength, not weakness, to do so. Blame shifting or excuses will not carry you far. Instead, they could compound your hardship.

- Count it all joy!

If after you have reconciled with God and your hardship persists, then you can count it all joy because your faith is being tested [**Jam. 1: 2**]. You can then glory in that hardship “knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope.” Hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in your heart by the Holy Spirit [**Rom. 5: 3-5**].

Whatever the enemy has taken from you will be restored. Your barrenness is no more. The spouse that God has chosen for you is knocking on your door. Your prodigal child is around the corner. Your healing is on the way. Your debts will soon be paid up. Your fears are now unfounded. All shall be well. This hardship shall pass!