

In the Tough Times - Week 82

We all know one basic truth about life: sometimes life can be very, very tough.

For many people in the world today, we can only wonder how they keep going at all. We hear so many stories in the news bulletins of daily dreadfulness beyond our imaginings - ordinary folk just like the rest of us living in areas of appalling brutality and constant fear. At any moment of the day or night they may be confronted with gangs of trigger-happy thugs in their midst, abducting, raping, executing, and destroying, as in Nigeria, Somalia or Iraq, or with rockets and missiles exploding all round them, as in Syria, Israel or Gaza. In such circumstances the little routines of daily life - getting the kids to school, buying food, getting some medicine, filling up with petrol - become times of real danger.

Or we can think of those miserable thousands of souls who try to escape from their home countries, leaving family behind, travelling thousands of miles across deserts at the mercy of unscrupulous agents, in a desperate bid to get to Europe. The final stage of such a journey is a dangerous voyage in a dodgy, overcrowded vessel across the Mediterranean. For those who do finally reach a European shore - their version of heaven - they find that nobody wants them. We are now seeing the same scenario with thousands of unaccompanied children leaving Central America, reaching Mexico, and then crossing into the United States.

Great wrongs on a global scale underlie such miseries: God's world is far from what it should be. Yet somehow, people cope: life, for most of the people, for most of the time, goes on.

Such experiences are way beyond what most of us in western countries encounter in the way of toughness - and that realisation in itself can be helpful in keeping our own difficulties in context. For us, the toughness can come in different ways - still unpleasant, but usually far less dangerous.

For our part we know about the stress of lives that just become too busy - too much to get done, and never enough time to get it all done. We worry perhaps about things of now or things of the future: about relationships that have gone horribly sour, or money, redundancy, health, bereavement - it can be a long list of life simply being tough.

Tough times are much more usual than we sometimes like to think. "In this world you will have trouble", the Lord warns us, but then He goes on, "but fear not, I have over come the world" (John 16.33). Many of the Psalms involve cries from the heart to the Lord God to *do something!* - anything, as long as this unpleasantness comes to an end.

C S Lewis, in "A Grief Observed", writes of how he found that in his times of deepest anguish after the death of his wife, the Lord - apparently - did nothing at all! Nothing changed - Lewis did not suddenly find his grief disappearing or his spirits lifting. So, on he plodded; he kept going, even when there seemed no point in keeping going, and even when it seemed that God could not care less.

But then, in unexpected ways and at unexpected times, those shafts of sunlight-hope from the Lord did break through for him. The pain remained, but his gloom lifted as he looked beyond his immediate state to keep in mind the fuller, greater Lord-directed picture.

He experienced in those tough years - and so can we - the truth of old words given to us for our comfort by the Holy Spirit: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him (Job 13.15); "In everything give thanks" (I Thessalonians 5.18); "My grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness (II Corinthians 12.8); "I will not fail nor forsake thee" (Joshua 1.5 / Hebrews 13.5); "all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to his purpose (Romans 8.28); "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?(NOTHING!) shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8. 35,39) - and many more such promises.

So as Christian pilgrims, we can play our part by living our lives at a godly pace, with the sense to say No to some things we are not going to take on. We keep to the old rhythms of prayer and worship and the study of God's Word, which give us that regular diet of spiritual food more vital to us than our physical food.

And come what may, we hold to the central truth that the Lord is the Lord. Amazingly, we are precious to Him. He knows what He is doing, and He makes it perfectly clear to us what we should be doing. It is in Christ, and in Him alone, that all is well - both right now, even in the tough times, and also in the times to come, when those tough times will be long past!

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