

THE ULTIMATE GIFT

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WEEK 5 - PROBLEMS

Blurb:

In Matthew 11 we read:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

*Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. **For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.**"*

So why does it not always feel like our burden is light?

Being a Christ follower definitely does not mean that we don't face problems and burdens – at least that has been my experience, more so in the last few months. So what does Christ mean by "my yoke is easy and my burden is light" – and what gifts do we discover in our problems and burdens?

The gift of problems

It has certainly been some time since I have been with you in this way. Being online with you all is one thing but being here in person and once again in the pulpit is another. Something I have sorely missed, even if I didn't realise it at the time.

When Allan called me to ask how I would feel about preaching this week I was in a good space and I agreed. Then he told me about the theme – the gift of problems – and I had a little giggle. So many times God has worked in this way – setting up the challenge of a preaching theme that connects so deeply with my personal journey and forcing me to handle whatever it is I am going through by reflecting on it biblically.

Today we're talking about the gift of problems. It sounds counterintuitive right? Why would problems be a gift. They certainly don't feel like a gift. Most often they feel awful. And surely, as a Christian, as a disciple of Christ my problems should go away? Or at least feel like less of a burden?

That thinking is certainly something that many Christians feel, and was perhaps something I felt for a long time in my early days of discipleship – that by choosing this path, my problems would somehow be lighter, less... That is of course what we often hear in the bible right?

I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." John 16:33

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Proverbs 3:5-6

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. 1 Corinthians 10:13

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Matthew 11: 29-30

But that is not the case is it? I know that each and every one of you here today has faced significant trials in the last 20 months – whether that was financial trials, the trials of loss and grief, the trials of isolation, of illness, and perhaps the scariest one of all – the loss of hope. And perhaps the idea that Christians don't face trials, or at least face lighter ones has meant that you have questioned your faith. Why Lord? We prayed so hard for so and so to be healed and he died. Why Lord? We prayed so hard and yet that family lost everyone. So many prayers seemingly unanswered. There have definitely been very dark times in my faith and I'm sure I am not the only one.

So why then are problems gifts to us? Although the verses we looked at earlier seem to promise an easy path ahead, think of any of the major people in the bible and you will find a trial they had to endure. The Israelites – 40 years of wandering through the desert. Job – so many many trials. Joseph – sold into slavery by his own brothers. Sarah – years of infertility. Paul – imprisoned multiple times. David – has to fight a giant. And Thecla – one of the earliest disciples who was not only disowned by her family but was sentenced to be burned at the stake because she chose to walk away from her fiancé and spread the word of Jesus with Paul. She survived – it rained that day. And of course Christ himself could only fulfill what he had to do through betrayal and death on the cross. Each and every disciple of Christ faced significant trials and tribulations on their journeys.

But why? What purpose do problems serve and how do we get through them? Let us read from James 1:1-12

I, James, am a slave of God and the Master Jesus, writing to the twelve tribes scattered to Kingdom Come: Hello!

Faith Under Pressure

²⁻⁴ Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides. You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colors. So don't try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way.

⁵⁻⁸ If you don't know what you're doing, pray to the Father. He loves to help. You'll get his help, and won't be condescended to when you ask for it. Ask boldly, believingly, without a second thought. People who "worry their prayers" are like wind-whipped waves. Don't think you're going to get anything from the Master that way, adrift at sea, keeping all your options open.

⁹⁻¹¹ When down-and-outers get a break, cheer! And when the arrogant rich are brought down to size, cheer! Prosperity is as short-lived as a wildflower, so don't ever count on it. You know that as soon as the sun rises, pouring down its scorching heat, the flower withers. Its petals wilt and, before you know it, that beautiful face is a barren stem. Well, that's a picture of the "prosperous life." At the very moment everyone is looking on in admiration, it fades away to nothing.

¹² Anyone who meets a testing challenge head-on and manages to stick it out is mighty fortunate. For such persons loyal in love with God, the reward is life and more life.

Firstly we learn that there is PURPOSE in trials. Through trials we GROW.

² Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters,^[a] whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that **the testing of your faith produces perseverance**. ⁴ Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be **mature and complete, not lacking anything**.

We do not grow – physically, emotionally, spiritually – without some resistance. Think about a child – if a parent tells them how to do everything or does everything for them and protects them and mollycoddles them, how do they learn to do things for themselves? How do they grow in confidence. Think of your health. How do we build our fitness and strength without some resistance, without muscles aching a little? Trials, problems are a natural part of being fully human and fully vulnerable. God does not create problems and challenges. But she also doesn't protect us from them. Like a good mother or a good father she allows us to go through them knowing that when we are through them we will be stronger for having navigated them. We of course are often like children – why are you doing this to me? It's not fair! But looking back we are able to reflect and understand that we grew in understanding, in faith, in empathy – somehow our problems, when we go through them and battle them out and don't ignore them, produce growth.

Secondly, trials highlight the importance of GOD in our lives.

So often we feel as if we are in control. We make plans, we execute those plans. And then suddenly – a curve ball to make us fall apart. Now don't get me wrong here. God does not CAUSE problems to cut us down to size. Problems are simply a natural part of being human. But when we do face a challenge we cannot help but be reminded that we are not in control, that we are not invulnerable, that we are not as powerful as we like to think we are. And in those moments, when we realise we cannot only rely on ourselves our eyes turn towards God. And we are reminded that she is in control, that she is working for good in all things, that he has his hand on our back gently guiding us through.

So, how do we work through trials and problems in a way that produces growth? There are a few lessons in the text we read from James.

First, we don't fake it, we embrace it. In the letter from James he says to us consider problems to be a sheer gift. Embrace it. How often do we do that? How often do you respond to the question *How are you?* With *Fine thanks!* I know I am a prime example of pretending that everything is fine, of swallowing down the emotion and just getting on with it, of avoiding the conflict. And it's not just me. Our culture is one where vulnerability is not celebrated. It's something that is looked down on. You've heard the terms – pull yourself up by the bootstraps. Just get on with it. Stop being a victim and step up to the plate. As a broader society, we don't hold out much empathy for those who are struggling, who are going through difficulties. So how do we go through problems and challenges?

- Sit with it
- Feel the pain and anger and sorrow
- Do not go through it alone "The path of life is darkest when we choose to walk it alone" – Kristin Harmel. Speak to people about what you're feeling or thinking. Not necessarily to ask for advice but to be seen and heard and witnessed in your vulnerability.
- We draw closer to God and ask for wisdom.

If you don't know what you're doing, pray to the Father. He loves to help. You'll get his help, and won't be condescended to when you ask for it. Ask boldly, believingly, without a second thought.

Finally we learn that problems and trials are often the way to LIFE.

We often live as if we are the living on the way to the dying, But God's word makes it very clear that we are the dying on the way to the living.

Problems slowly chip away at our armour of invulnerability and pride to slowly reveal our vulnerability, our humanness, and our connection with one another – what it really means to live.