

Tough Faith for Tough Times 2020
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We're living in tough times right now. It wasn't that long ago that:
 The stock market was rising to the highest levels ever and 401K's were growing.
 The value of our houses was rising. Unemployment was the lowest in history.
 Life was good and the future seemed even better. But here we are. Everywhere
 you turn, something seems to be going wrong.

We were hit with the Covid 19 epidemic and the results have been catastrophic.
 The stock market fell dramatically and 401K's became 201K's.
 Many people lost their jobs; and families are struggling to make ends meet.
 On top of that you have people preaching fear everywhere you turn.

On top of it all we have a bunch of politicians who seem to be more concerned
 about fixing blame than fixing the problem. They'd rather point their fingers at
 each other than join hands to turn things around.

It can all be very depressing. These are tough times. And as Christians we need
 tough faith to make it through tough times. That's why we're beginning a new
 series: Tough Faith for Tough Times.

If we are going to survive and thrive in tough times– we need tough faith.
 Let me give you some examples of tough times:

- A tough time is when you've spent a lifetime building a career and the economy tanks and you get laid off.
- A tough time is when you've had all your retirement in your company stock and the company goes out of business and now you're faced with having to work the rest of your life.
- A tough time is when a family member dies suddenly in an accident.
- A tough time is when you go to the doctor for a routine checkup and he says, "I found something that doesn't look good. I need to send you to a specialist."
- A tougher time is when the specialist says, "There's nothing I can do."
- A tough time is when your teen-aged child runs away.
- A tougher time is when they come back home addicted and pregnant.
- A tough time is when you've been married for 20 years and one day your spouse says, "I don't love you anymore. I want out."
- A tougher time is when they want to come back after three affairs that did not work out – they have a sexually transmitted disease - and they expect you to forgive them and take them back.

I've been pastoring long enough to have faced all these issues with church members at some time.

And I've seen people go through tough times different ways. I've actually seen some people make their tough times tougher. How? By the way they respond.

We make tough times even tougher is when we think God does not care. Tough times become tougher when we turn against God rather than turn to God. Tough times become tougher when we try to go it alone. Tough times become tougher when we don't know how to go through them with tough faith.

I want to make sure you understand that we as Christians are not exempt from tough times. In Matthew 7:24-27, Jesus said:

Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall.

There's a few things I want us to see in these verses. These truths will help us develop tough faith for tough times.

1- Tough Times Come to Everyone

In this passage, Jesus said that rain, floods and winds came against everyone - the believer and the unbeliever.

Some Christians get the wrong impression that when we serve God, we will never have any tough times. They think the Bible should say the unbeliever's house fell because the rain and wind came against it. And the believer's house stood because the rain and wind did not come against it.

But that's not what the Bible teaches. Yes, God protects us. Yes, God delivers us. But tough times come to everyone. Accept it. Nobody has a problem free life. Nobody lives on easy street. Tough faith is not surprised by tough times.

1 Peter 4:12-13 says:

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed.

I like the way the Message version says it:

Friends, when life gets really difficult, don't jump to the conclusion that God isn't on the job. Instead, be glad that you are in the very thick of what Christ experienced. This is a spiritual refining process, with glory just around the corner.

You will never develop tough faith if you only believe God delivers us from tough times rather than understanding God also takes us through tough times for a purpose. That purpose is God's glory and our good.

Yes sometimes God delivers us *from* tough times – sometimes He takes us *through*. We cannot allow ourselves to turn against God or think that He is not good when we go through tough times.

God is good when He delivers *from* and God is good when He takes us *through*. Think about it:

God did not deliver David from Goliath, He strengthened David to kill Goliath.

God did not deliver Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego from the fire: He took them through the fire.

God did not deliver Noah from the flood: He took him through the flood.

There are times God may allow us to go through the flood and the fire. But the truth is God will be with us and the flood will not drown us and the fire will not burn us! We have God's promise on that in Isaiah 43:1-2

Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned.

Tough times come to everyone, but we need tough faith to believe that God will get us through.

2- Tough times never last; tough times come to pass.

One of my favorite Bible phrases is: And it came to pass.

When you're in a tough time – tell yourself the truth that this too shall pass.

Every mountain has a top.

Every valley has a bottom.

Every storm has an end.

Every cloud has a silver lining.

Every winter has a spring.

People get into trouble when they forget there are seasons and cycles for everything. Economies always have cycles of prosperity and recession. Every generation faces a tough financial time.

For my grand parents it was the Great Depression of the 30's when unemployment was over 25% and the average family lost 40% of income.

For my parents it was the recession of the 80's when unemployment was over 10% and the prime interest rate was 21.5%.

Now it's our season.

My point? Don't think it's strange that we're going through a tough time.

Tough times will come and go. Tough times never last – but tough faith does!

3- You choose how you respond to tough times.

You can't choose everything that happens to you, but you can choose how you respond.

What do you do when you face tough times? Do you realize that God is more concerned about what you do with what happens to you than about what happens to you?

God is never caught by surprise. In fact, He has spent your whole life preparing you for this moment and others that you are yet to face. Do you believe that He uses everything you go through for His kingdom purposes? Tough times prove our faith.

When tough times come:

You can respond in faith or in fear.

You can respond by turning to God or turning from God.

You can respond by getting better or getting bitter.

You can choose to soar or choose to get sour.

You can choose to win or you can choose to whine.

I want to help you develop tough faith. To do that, here's what we must do:

4- We must change the way we think about tough times.

We do that by reminding ourselves of what I've already taught you.

Tough times come to everyone.

Tough times never last – tough times come to pass.

I choose to respond the right way by trusting in God's goodness.

I will get better, not bitter.

5- We must choose to learn from tough times.

James 1:2-4 says:

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

In other words, there is some growth that will not happen in us without tough times.

Anybody who works out and tries to build muscle knows this statement: "No pain – no gain."

In other words, if you want to build muscle, you must put your muscle under enough weight and stress to cause pain. It's not the workout that builds muscle. Workouts actually tear muscle down. Muscle is built in the rest time between workouts. It's also true in developing faith – no pain, no gain.

We'll deal with building faith and what we learn from tough times in other sermons. For today I just want you to realize that you must go through some tough times to build tough faith.

Nothing really grows in a stress-free environment. Trees only develop deep roots when they go through windy times and dry times.

In the late 80's a Texas billionaire financed a project called Biosphere 2. The purpose of it was to see if man could create a closed environment that would sustain life by creating its own oxygen, water and food. The biosphere was built in an Arizona desert. The trees were one of the most essential elements of the biosphere because they produced fruit to eat and oxygen to breathe. So, nothing but the best trees were selected.

However, soon into the experiment it became obvious that something was seriously wrong with the trees. They did not flourish. In fact, they drooped and struggled to survive. Some got top heavy and fell over. They were not creating the oxygen that was needed, so oxygen had to be pumped in while the problem was analyzed.

The scientists examined everything about the trees and discovered that the biosphere gave the trees everything they needed - except one thing - wind. Without wind, the trees were never forced to struggle. They were not forced to develop deep roots. Without wind, the trees were weak and vulnerable.

There were other reasons the biosphere failed - but it shows than man cannot create a perfect problem-free environment.

It's the same in life. None of us can create a perfect, problem-free environment. If we could, we would not grow in our faith. When we try to isolate ourselves from the winds of life - our faith will never be developed. We will end up weak and easily swayed.

I guess what I'm saying is this: to develop faith for tough times, you must have tough times. You'll never develop strong faith without it.

One of the biggest lessons we can learn from tough times is this:

6- We must choose to believe the truth over the facts.

What do I mean by that? The facts are the reality we see around us, but the truth is what God says about it.

2 Corinthians 5:7 says: *For we walk by faith, not by sight.*

This does not mean that what we see is not real. We do not live in denial of the facts. But we don't confuse the facts and God's truth. How do we do that?

In the passage about building on the rock or the sand, what determined whether a house stood or fell? Most people say, one was built on the rock and the other on the sand. True – but what determined whether it was built on rock or sand?

Jesus said that the foolish heard His words, but did not do them. The wise man heard His words, and did them.

You see, it's not enough to hear the word, you must also do it. If you hear it and don't do it, your life WILL fall apart at some time. Your life WILL fall apart when tough times come.

But when you hear the Word and DO IT – your life will stand through tough times. This is why I always work to get you into the Word. Because when you get in the word and the word gets it in and you begin doing the word – you will have tough faith for tough times!

What the word does is establish us in truth. Then we are able to distinguish between the facts and the truth. What do I mean by that?

The facts are that the economy is struggling and may continue to get worse. But the truth is, God has promised to meet our needs according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus!

The facts are we are in a recession. But the truth is I've been young and now I'm old and I've never – NEVER – seen the righteous forsaken or their seed begging for bread.

The facts are there is evil in the world that wants to kill us. But the truth is greater is He that is in us than he that is in the world!

The enemy wants to steal, kill and destroy, but Jesus came to give us abundant life. The facts are there are situations that are impossible for men to fix – for governments to fix – for armies to fix. But the truth is with God all things are possible!

The facts are we don't know what the future holds. But the truth is we know Who holds the future!

The facts are troubled times are here. But the truth is God is our refuge and God is our strength – a very present help in times of trouble!

The facts is that not everything that happens to us is good. But the truth is God works everything together for our good. God can even bring good out of what the enemy means for our harm!

The facts are times may get darker. But the truth is, weeping may endure for the night, but joy comes in the morning! The facts are we may be weak and have no strength. But the truth is we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us!

Don't confuse the facts with the truth!
 The facts are based on what people say.
 The truth is based on what God says.

The facts are the doctor's report.
 The truth is the Great Physician's report.

The facts are what's in the bank account.
 The truth is what's in the heavenly account.

To walk in truth we must choose to believe the Word of the Lord.
 Even when the facts are staring you in the face.

Have you ever believed God for a miracle when there was no sign of an answer?
 You prayed and prayed and feel as if God doesn't hear you?
 You may even be so discouraged you've stopped asking for your miracle.

We must remind ourselves that God's Word cannot come back void – or empty.
 It will always accomplish what God sends it to do.
 God does not lie nor go back on His Word!
 Your answer is on its way because He promised it.

I want to encourage you to stand firm in your faith; remind God of His promises
 and believe for Him to move on your behalf.
 Tough faith outlasts tough times.
 Tough faith keeps on believing even in the presence of doubt.

Tough faith outgives tough times.
 Tough faith keeps on giving even in the time of need because it knows that to
 meet a need, you must sow a seed.
 Tough faith outprays tough times.
 Tough faith keeps on praising through tough times.
 Tough faith keeps on trusting in tough times.
 I encourage you today to start developing tough faith for tough times!