

13 - LORD, INCREASE OUR FAITH!

FORGIVENESS IS A PROCESS

On the night of December 30, 1993, Lyndi Fourie was visiting with friends at the Heidelberg Café in Cape Town, South Africa. A beautiful 23 year old, Lyndi was just completing her degree in civil engineering at the University of Cape Town. Suddenly, without warning, a hail of automatic gunfire tore through the restaurant. Four were killed. Lyndi was one of them.

Three men from the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) had been ordered to “make Whites suffer as Blacks had suffered under apartheid.” It became known as the “Heidelberg massacre.” Hearing the news the next day, Lyndi’s parents were devastated. Ginn grieved deeply the loss of her only daughter. The joy they experienced together was gone forever.

Describing her daughter, Ginn said, “She was a humorous, outgoing, friendly person who loved the outdoors. That’s why she went for civil engineering—so she could be out in the field rather than sitting in an office all day. She was a great horseback rider, loved hiking in the mountains and played a good game of tennis.”

Ginn found great support among the members of the church where her faith had been nurtured. At Lyndi’s funeral, Ginn shared this prayer:

Gracious Parent, Great Spirit, You gave Your only Son to bring healing for every soul on earth. Thank You for our only daughter. May healing come through her death to each person she touched--especially those who murdered her. I identify with Mary, Jesus’ mother; our children died at the hands of evil men. Lyndi had no choice, no time, but Your Son said it for her: “Father, forgive them; they do not know what they do.” We gave her bed and board and some love. You gave her forgiveness and a love that was honest, pure, selfless, color- and gender-free.

Dear God, she taught me well of You, able to listen, able to hear. That was her life that You gave her. Her death was swift and painless, thank goodness. My heart is broken; the hole is bottomless, it will not end, but You know all about it. Thank You for the arms, the lips, the heartbeats of family

and friends to carry us. I trust You with my precious Lyndi. This planet is a dangerous place to live. I know You will come soon to fetch us, I wish it were today, but I will wait for Your time.

In November, 1994, the three men who were on trial for the murder denied any knowledge of the event, even though the evidence against them was overwhelming.

As Ginn observed and listened, she said, “I was confronted by my own feelings of anger and sadness, and how I could possibly respond appropriately. Somehow I could engender no hate, in spite of the grim reminders presented by video and close-up, colored photos of Lyndi and three others lying dead in the tavern. In their eyes I saw what I thought must have been enormous confusion. I sent them a message through the translator that if they were or felt guilty, then I forgave them.” They thanked her, though still denying any participation in the murder. They were sentenced to 25 years in prison.

Three years later they requested amnesty from the “Truth and Reconciliation Commission.” Again Ginn reaffirmed her forgiveness for the three. They thanked her and said that they would take the message of forgiveness and hope to their communities and to their graves, whether they received amnesty or not. Amnesty was granted to them in 1998.

In 2002, Ginn met Letlapa Mphahlele, the former commander of the military wing of the PAC who ordered the attack that killed her daughter. “I’ve been to court, accused of this and that, and when the charges were later withdrawn, nothing inside of me was moved. But it took one sentence from Ginn Fourie saying, ‘I forgive you for what you have done; I forgive you for killing my only daughter, Lyndi,’ something was restored in me, and that something was humanity.”

Ginn and Letlapa are now working together to bring healing through forgiveness, education and retraining people who have been abused and shamed through oppression and poverty. Together they formed the Lyndi Fourie Foundation. (See www.lyndifouriefoundation.org.za/)

“Forgiveness is a process, which involves a principled decision to give up ones justifiable right to revenge.” Ginn Fourie

A LIFESTYLE OF FORGIVENESS

1. Why did the disciples say, “Increase our faith?” Luke 17:1-5

Jesus’ teaching on forgiveness was not what they believed. It seemed unwise, for people would take advantage of them. It seemed impossible. They would need more faith in order to carry out Jesus’ instruction.

2. How did Jesus respond to their request? Luke 17:6-10

Jesus implied the size of their faith was not as important as who their faith was in. Faith the size of a small mustard seed could uproot a large mulberry tree. In other words, the impossible is possible with God. (Jesus wasn’t telling them to change the landscape to show they had faith. He didn’t “show off” his faith by working a senseless miracle.)

When we learn God is not counting any of our sins against us, no matter who we are or what we have done, we realize how unconditional God's love is (2 Cor. 5:19). When we invite Jesus to be our Savior and Lord and receive His love and forgiveness for ourselves, we will experience the security we need that will enable us to love and forgive others.

Jesus also implied that forgiveness is what is normal and healthy in the kingdom of God. It is what is expected. It is not “extraordinary” and deserving of special praise or honor. It is what His servants will do.

If we persistently refuse to forgive, we are saying that:

- We want to cling onto our hate, bitterness, and desire for revenge.
- We don’t want God to work a miracle in our lives.
- We don’t want a Savior from our sin.
- We don’t want forgiveness, for we don’t want to confess or repent.

That is why Jesus said, “If you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” Matt. 6:15.

Forgiveness leads us to:

- Not count the sin of others against them (2 Corinthians 5:19).
- Look beyond the faults of others and try to understand their needs.
- Pray for and serve our enemies, rather than forget or avoid them.
- Allow a person an opportunity to *earn* our trust. Jesus didn’t trust people automatically, for “He knew what was in man” John 2:25.

3. Read Luke 6:27-38

A. Does this make you feel like saying, “Lord, increase my faith?”

B. What enables us to continue to give love to others? (38)

This passage is first a revelation of how God treats us. We are the enemies He has blessed with the gift of life, salvation, and forgiveness (Romans 5:6-10; 2 Corinthians 5:19). We are the ones He is praying for.

When we experience His amazing love, we begin to have a desire to share His love with others. Jesus promises that whatever we need to fulfill that mission will be supplied. “Give and it will be given to you.” When we think of ourselves as a channel of God’s blessings, it frees God to continue to supply our needs. (See also Deut. 15:6-10). Those who receive in order to give will find joy in being a blessing to people.

Jesus says to give to everyone who asks of you. He didn’t say, “Give *what* they ask of you!” God doesn’t give us everything we ask for, but He does give us what we need when we trust Him (Matthew 6:33). Sometimes saying no is what is needed (Mark 1:35-38; 2 Cor. 12:7-10).

God is anxious to bless everyone (Numbers 6:23-27). However, He has to be very careful. He knows His blessings could appeal to our selfish natures and lead us to use what He has given us only for ourselves. We

will then be tempted to neglect and reject God. If we do, God will allow us to suffer the natural consequences. (Deut. 8,28,29,30; Rom. 1:18-28.)

JEALOUSY LEADS TO UNBELIEF

4. Read Matthew 17:14-21 to see how Jesus used the mustard seed illustration another time. The context is very different.

A. What were Jesus' disciples unable to do? (14-16)

B. How did Jesus describe the general problem that needed to be corrected? (17)

“Then Jesus answered and said, ‘O _____ and _____ generation, how long shall I be with you?’”

C. How did Jesus respond when the disciples asked why they were not able to cast the demon out? (19-21)

“Because of your _____.... This kind does not go out except by _____ and _____.”

D. What did Jesus say could be moved if one had faith as a mustard seed? (20)

5. What event took place just before the above story? Matt. 17:1-13

In order to understand this story, it is valuable to see the broader context.

Previous Experience

Jesus had already given His disciples “power over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease” Matthew 10:1. Since they had cast out evil spirits in the past, they must have wondered why they were not able to do it this time.

Current Jealousy

While Peter, James, and John were with Jesus was on the mountain, the other disciples were in the valley waiting. Matthew, Mark and Luke tell the same three stories in the same sequence. Each of them have unique details that add to the whole picture.

Mark lets us know the disciples were arguing about who was the greatest (Mark 9:34). This spirit of envy, jealousy, and pride fostered an attitude of unbelief. If God had used them to cast the demon out at that time, it would have only encouraged their prideful attitude. The disciples' unbelief not only prevented them from healing the boy, it led the crowd to question Jesus' ability to heal.

Prayer and fasting are necessary to keep our focus right, not to manipulate God into acting. By humbling ourselves and becoming teachable, God is able to communicate more clearly to us and trust us with His power and presence.

When we slip back into fulfilling “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life” 1 John 2:16, we open the door to Satan and become part of the “perverse generation.” The word “perverse” comes from a Greek word meaning to distort; to misinterpret truth; to morally corrupt someone (Strong's Concordance).

Jesus used the mustard seed illustration to communicate that God is able to do the impossible through us when we are humble, teachable and submissive to His will. Our faith must be in Him and not in ourselves.

THANK YOU FOR THE TRIALS

6. Read 1 Peter 1:6-9

A. What emotion do we experience when we are tested by trials? (6)

B. What does Peter say is more precious than gold? (7)

C. How is gold tested? (7)

D. How are people tested? (7; compare with 1 Peter 4:12; Is. 48:10)

E. What attitude does faith enable a person to have? (8)

Trials often lead to a loss of something or someone dear to us. This is why we experience the natural emotion of grief. However, the one who has faith in Jesus can “rejoice with joy inexpressible,” for they know that God is able to bring good out of evil. He will also make all things new in the end (Romans 8:28; Revelation 21:1-5).

Trials provide opportunities for us to learn to trust God more and more. If we were never tested, we wouldn’t know if we were living by faith in God or by our own wisdom and strength.

7. Read 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

A. Why was Paul allowed to experience a “thorn in the flesh”? (7)

B. What did God say to Paul when he asked for it to be removed? (8)

C. What was Paul’s attitude as a result of God’s answer? (10)

Pride is very dangerous to our selfish nature. God allowed Paul to have a lifelong trial to keep him humble. At first, Paul was thinking it would hinder him from doing God’s work, so he prayed earnestly for God to remove it. However, when God said no, He assured Paul that His grace

would be sufficient to help him carry out the mission he was given. This led Paul to rejoice. He learned that it would help keep him looking to God for strength and help.

God is big enough to handle all the trials we experience. When we are weak, we recognize our need to trust God. When we trust Him, we become strong. Living by faith includes remembering we are weak all of the time and that we can do nothing apart from Jesus (John 15:4,5).

8. Read 1 Corinthians 10:13

A. What truth can keep us from throwing a pity party?

B. What does Paul say God will not allow?

C. What does Paul say God will do?

It is easy to murmur and complain when we go through trials and temptations. It is easy to feel we have it worse than other people do. However, Paul assures us that the temptations we face are similar to what others have faced.

John tells us why. He says all temptations fall into one of three categories: “. . . the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.” 1 John 2:16. This is why it can be said that Jesus “was in all *points* tempted as *we are*, yet without sin” Hebrews 4:15.

In the Old Testament, God summarized all sin into two categories. “For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, *And* hewn themselves cisterns—broken cisterns that can hold no water” Jeremiah 2:13.

1 Corinthians 10:13 is often summarized in this way: “God will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able. . . to bear.”

By itself, this leads to an unhealthy expectation, for we will face temptations that are beyond our ability to handle on our own. However, God does promise that He will provide a way of escape so we can stand up under the temptation. Since God may not reveal His plan right away, we tend to get nervous and try to figure out our own plan.

This is what Abraham did when he lied by saying his wife, Sarah, was only his sister. He did this to try to protect himself from perceived danger (Gen. 12,20). He and Sarah also thought they had to help God fulfill His promise for a son. Since Sarah was no longer able to have children, she suggested that Abraham have a child through her servant Hagar (Genesis 16).

If we are willing to disobey God in order to free ourselves from any trial, we are trusting in ourselves. But if we wait upon God, He will provide the plan of escape that is best. “They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength” Isaiah 40:31.

9. 2 Corinthians 1:8-10

A. How did Paul feel about a trial he faced?

B. What was the escape plan he believed God would provide?

The trial Paul faced was beyond what he could bear on his own. He thought for sure he was going to die. The only plan of escape he could see was the resurrection. He was at peace with that. But God had another plan. Paul wrote, God “delivered us from so great a death, and does deliver us; in whom we trust that He will still deliver us.”

Nebuchadnezzar threatened to throw Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego into the fire if they didn't bow down the image he erected. They replied, “Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up” Daniel 3:17,18.

The ones who threw them into the fire died from the extreme heat. However, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were unharmed. In fact, Jesus came and talked with them in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3:22-26).

Daniel was threatened with being thrown into the lion's den if he prayed to God. He prayed anyway. When he was thrown in, God shut the lions' mouths. The next day, those who plotted against him were thrown in. No deliverance was provided for them (Daniel 6).

It would have been easy for Paul, Daniel and the three Hebrews to rationalize and compromise in order to avoid the consequences. But they would have missed out on the amazing miracle God provided for them.

Sometimes God chooses not to provide a miraculous deliverance. When John the Baptist was put in prison, he wasn't sure what would happen. He sent a message to Jesus, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?" Matthew 11:3.

Jesus replied, "Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: 'The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me'" Matthew 11:4-6.

God chose not to deliver John from prison or death (Matthew 14:1-12). Instead, Jesus sent him a message that encouraged him to remain faithful, even unto death. Learning to trust God in every aspect of life is part of the process of growing into maturity.

CHOOSING TO BE JOYFUL IN OUR TRIALS

10. Read James 1:2-4

A. What are we to do when we fall into various trials? (2)

B. What can the testing of our faith produce in us? (3-4)

We are to *count* it all joy when we face trials. We may not feel joyful. Trials bring pain. It is OK to grieve (1 Peter 1:6). However, we can *choose* to rejoice when we remember that God will bring something good out of every difficulty when we trust Him with our lives (Romans 8:28). We can also choose to be joyful when we remember His promises are trustworthy and His love is everlasting.

James does not designate what kind of trials he is talking about. He simply refers to trials of various kinds. In other words, he is referring to all kinds of trials, even when they are a result of our own failures.

Teachers use tests to reveal what students have learned from previous study and experience. Trials in life provide us with opportunities to:

- Learn whether our faith is in God or in ourselves.
- Learn that God is faithful and trustworthy.

The testing of our faith develops patience. The Greek word translated patience is *hupomeno*. *Hupo* means under and *meno* means to abide. A greater confidence in God will enable us to “abide under” the trials while we wait for His plan of escape.

11. Read James 1:5-8

A. What does God promise to give us when we face trials? (5)

B. Why does James add, “...without reproach”? (5)

C. What are we like when we doubt after asking for wisdom? (6-8)

In the midst of trials we are encouraged to ask God for wisdom. He promises to give it “liberally” to all who ask. Sometimes trials are a

result of our wrong choices. It would be easy to think we don't deserve God's help. James assures us He is *not* going to find fault with us and say, "How dare you ask for wisdom. You got yourself into this mess, you can get yourself out. You didn't take it seriously when I gave it last time, why should I give you any more?" God is wants us to follow His will, so He is anxious to give us wisdom.

Those who doubt God will try to take matters into their own hands. Their questioning will lead them to mix their own ideas with whatever wisdom God gives. As a result, they will be like the waves, going back and forth, rather than trusting in God's promises. (See Numbers 14 for an example of people doubting God and refusing to follow Him.)

CHOOSING TO BE THANKFUL IN OUR TRIALS

12. Read Philippians 4:6,7

A. What are we asked to do when we are faced with anxiety?

B. Why is it important to be thankful when we pray?

C. What will we experience when we trust God?

Every difficulty is a call to prayer. Every trial is an opportunity to see God work and to learn that He is trustworthy. He will fulfill His promises in a way that is consistent with His wisdom, power and love.

Our choice to thank God even before we see the answer is an act of faith. We are trusting that He has heard us and that He will answer us in the time and way that He sees is best. Trusting God with our lives and situation will enable us to experience inner peace. The following verses also emphasize the peace we can have:

Isaiah 26:3 - “You will keep *him* in perfect peace, *Whose* mind is stayed on *You*, Because he trusts in *You*.”

John 14:27 - “Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.”

John 16:33 - “These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”

FAITH IN THE LAST DAYS

13. What question does Jesus ask related to faith? Luke 18:8

14. How are God’s followers described at the end? Revelation 14:12

Jesus implies that faith in God will be very limited at the end. However, God’s followers will place their faith in Jesus. Their one desire will be to live for the glory of God and bring honor to Him. The promise is that they will follow Jesus wherever He goes (Revelation 14:4,5).

15. What is the key to overcoming trials and temptations?

A. 1 John 5:4 “And this is the _____ that has _____ the world--our _____.”

B. 1 Timothy 6:12 “_____ the good fight of _____, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called.”

Learning to trust God is the most important lesson we can learn in life.

THE TRUST FALL

The “trust fall” is a wonderful way to illustrate how God teaches us to trust Him. When working with children, I will say, “I will catch you. I promise, I will not let you fall. Would you like to do the trust fall?”

When they say yes, I ask them to stand up on a chair and then I tell them, “Stand straight with your arms folded. Close your eyes and then fall straight back without stepping back or bending at the waist or the knees. I will catch you! I promise.” When I say this, I am right behind them with my arms ready to catch them.

The child usually looks back to see if I am truly ready. They wonder if they should trust me or not. If the child falls back exactly as instructed, I know they have chosen to trust me. Most often, they hesitate, look again and pause some more.

If this happens, I put my hand on their back and tell them to lean backward, showing that I can hold their weight. Then I have them stand up straight again and fall back an inch, then two inches, then three and four and five until their trust in me builds up. Then they are usually able to fall straight back with eyes closed and no bending.

God is also trying to teach us to trust Him. He allows trials to help us learn that He truly is able to “catch us.” If we hesitate, He is patient with us. If we compromise our convictions to escape the trial, He allows us to experience the painful consequences of our sinful choices and waits for us to be willing to return to Him.

He always forgives. He will then allow other trials that we may have the opportunity to learn to trust God’s promises and see how He will work. Our faith in Him increases each time we experience that He is faithful. It is very important that we are open to His “plan of escape,” rather than simply telling Him what He should do. We may miss the very plan that He has prepared for us if our expectations are wrong.