

Opportunity or Obstacle? (subtitle: the believer's attitude)

1 Thessalonians 5:18 New American Standard Bible

¹⁸ in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:13 New American Standard Bible

¹³ I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

Introduction

Once I opened a fortune cookie after the meal in a Chinese restaurant. It read, "Your golden opportunity is coming shortly." I loved it and I even took the photo of it. Who wouldn't love that?! Sometimes, a golden opportunity comes in disguise—in the form of obstacle. Such a case happened to many but here is one example.

It was December 1914. In Menlo Park, Edison, NJ, Thomas Edison's laboratory was virtually destroyed by a fire. The buildings were insured for only a fraction of the money that it would cost to rebuild them. He was sixty-seven years old, and most of Edison's life's work went up in flames on that December night. The next morning, Edison looked at the ruins and said, "There is a great value in after the disaster. All our mistakes are burned up. Thank God we can start anew." Three weeks after the fire, Edison delivered his first phonograph—Jack Canfield and M. Hansen, *A Third Serving of Chicken Soup for the Soul* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, 1996).

We all live with hardships. Life throws us into difficult situations from time to time, doesn't it? Trouble-free lives-- we have no such luxury. Rick Warren's view: *I used to think that life was hills and valleys-you go through a dark time, then you go to the mountaintop, back and forth. I don't believe that anymore. Rather than life being hills and valleys, I believe that it's kind of like two rails on a railroad track, and at all times you have something good and something bad in your life. No matter how good things are in your life, there is always something bad that needs to be worked on. And no matter how bad things are in your life, there is always something good you can thank God for.*

Content

Two Thinking Patterns

When we deal with the situations in life, especially with bad ones, we have two choices. Either we can curse the circumstances and cry out that the world is cruel and unfair, or we can embrace the challenges and transform crises into an opportunity to grow. Our thinking and attitude are crucial, because *"it influences our actions, it affects our satisfaction*

with life, and determines our personal effectiveness” [Christopher Neck and Charles Manz, *Mastering Self-Leadership*, 5th edition, p. 75]. These two authors claim that there are two thinking patterns among people in times of crisis.

“Opportunity thinking involves a pattern of thoughts that focus on the opportunities and possibilities that situations or challenges hold. Creative, innovative individuals who contribute to the major breakthroughs and advances in our world most likely possess this sort of pattern of thinking. Their beliefs, their imagined future experiences, and their self-talk probably spur them on to undertake new opportunities.

Obstacle thinking, on the other hand, involves a focus on the roadblocks and pitfalls of undertaking new ventures. Such a mental pattern fosters avoidance of challenges in favor of more secure actions, often with substantially less potential payoffs” (*Ibid.*, p. 74).

The Believer’s Attitude

The Bible shows us both examples: how the people of God responded in the face of crisis: sometimes they courageously took up the challenge, other times, they retreated from the crisis in fear.

First example: Caleb and Joshua facing the giants in Canaan (Numbers 13). 12 spies for 40 days [13:12,25]. Report to the congregation of Israel. Ten of the twelve spies, except Caleb and Joshua, gave them the bad report saying: “We cannot go against these people, for they are stronger than we. The land is a land that devours its inhabitants. Compared to the size of the inhabitants, we are like grasshoppers” (Numbers 13:31-33). All congregation raised a loud cry, and they wept that night. They complained against Moses and Aaron, “would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the LORD bringing us into this land to fall by the sword? It is better for us to go back to Egypt. Let us choose a captain and go back to Egypt” (Numbers 14:1-4). Caleb said, “Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it” (Numbers 13:30). Joshua said, “The land is exceedingly good land, and the LORD will bring us into this land and give it to us. Do not fear the people of the land, for they are no more than bread for us. The LORD is with us. Do not fear them” (Numbers 14:7-9).

Joshua and Caleb shared one thing in common: an attitude. They refused to run away from their challenges. Rather, they faced them head-on. I would call such an attitude “the Believer’s Attitude.” They believed, not in themselves of course, but in someone greater than they, God. They didn’t rely on their own might. Rather, they claimed God’s promises and drew their strengths from God’s power. Their attitude determined their destiny. The Lord did exactly as what they had said. According to their unwavering convictions, they both entered the Promised Land and conquered the enemies. What about

the rest of the Israelites? According to their wish and faith, they all perished in the wilderness. None entered the Promised Land. Listen to what the Lord said to all: “I will do to you the very thing I heard you say (Numbers 14:28).”

Where does the believer’s attitude come from? It comes from the faith in God. When things are going well, faith doesn’t seem necessary. However, in trying times, it shines the best. Hardships are the best time for us to exercise our faith and experience the living God.

Faith is not the same as positive thinking. Actually, it is far better than and far superior to the human positive thinking. You can be positive without faith in God. You can even have some positive outcomes when you exercise such a positive outlook on life. However, unless you exercise your faith in God, especially in hard times, you will never truly experience the dynamic power of the Almighty God and His deliverance.

Consider Paul’s attitude: 1) believed in God’s providence in all circumstances 2) trusted that God would make all things, good and bad, beautiful in due time (Romans 8:28). He never let circumstances put him down. Rather, in every crisis, he soared up above the hardships. E.g. Isaiah 40:31 (Those who wait for the Lord will mount up with wings like eagles...).

Let me tell you what Paul had been through recorded in 2 Corinthians 11:23-28. He’d been through numerous imprisonments, floggings (5 times of 40 lashes minus one), was stoned once, three times ship-wrecked, many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold, and naked. Each time hardship knocked him down, God raised him up. No sign of defeat. He triumphantly declared in Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things in whom who strengthens me.”

Conclusion

Christ is the Victor. He calls us to be triumphant. We are called to be victorious in Christ by applying “the believer’s attitude” to our crises and failures: loss of jobs [e.g. Steve Jobs once said that “fired from Apple was the best thing that could have ever happened to me” Steve Jobs—Neck and Manz, *Ibid.*, p. 77], failures in relationships, loss of health [being more grateful and change of priorities], financial crises, ...

Action Points this week:

- Thank God daily for the situations you are in.
- Pray daily 5 minutes on your challenges.

- Memorize today's verses: 1 Thessalonians 5:18 and Philippians 4:13. Recite them every day and they will lift you up each time you feel down and hopeless.

Amen.

Let us pray.