

WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN

DEALING WITH CHALLENGES AS CHRISTIANS



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Dealing With Challenges as Christians

Adversity, Challenge, Misfortune, Bad Luck... Which one?

The English Thesaurus gives an impressive list of synonyms for Adversity:

misfortune, ill luck, bad luck, trouble, difficulty, hardship, distress, disaster, misadventure, suffering, affliction, sorrow, misery, heartbreak, heartache, wretchedness, tribulation, woe, pain, trauma, torment, torture, mishap, stroke of ill luck, stroke of bad luck, accident, shock, upset, reverse, reversal, reversal of fortune, setback, crisis, catastrophe, tragedy, calamity, trial, cross, burden, blow, buffet, vicissitude, issue, hard times, dire straits, trials and tribulations; *informal*: hell, hell on earth, hassle, stress; *literary*: dolor, travails.

If you google “How to deal with misfortunes in life” you will get about 54,800,000 results in 0.35 seconds... That’s quite a volume of advice and “help” anyone having access to the internet can be supplied with instantly... This tremendous amount of noise and chatter generates a false sense of orientation, when, actually, it is quite the

opposite that takes place.

People also ask, says the search result, a practical “How do you get over misfortune?” This sounds like an obstacle course. A more clinical “What causes misfortune in our life?” follows that one—just have your masks handy to keep away this virus... The third helpful question is a bit philosophical: “Why does misfortune happen?” There must be some statistical probability...

Scrolling down further, past the “advertised” entries, here is a sampling of the “serious” looking titles for all tastes and religious camps:

When Life’s Unfair: How to Deal with Fines for Being Alive (Psychology Today)

Faith and Reason: How to Cope with the Misfortunes of Life (Forbes)

How Thinking About Misfortune Can Improve Your Life (The Collector)

How to Handle Bad Luck - Martha Beck Life Advice (Oprah)

6 Lessons To Help You Navigate Misfortune In Life (Better Humans)

7 Ways to Cope When Life Gets Tough (Psychology Today)

Resilience: Build skills to endure hardship (Mayo Clinic)

How to Get Rid of Bad Luck (with Pictures) (wikiHow)

Schadenfreude: How to Respond When Bad Things ... (VeryWell Mind)

Making Sense of Misfortune: Deservingness, Self-Esteem ... (National Institutes of Health)

How To Get Rid Of Bad Luck & Negative Energy (YourTango)

Why does God let bad things happen? (Institute in Basic Life Principles)

Such *Suzuki Methods* of achieving things in six lessons are good for the gullible. Dealing with challenges as Christians is much more serious than surfing the internet for the magic cure!

A Still More Excellent Way

Injustice, adversities, and misfortunes are debilitating: physically, mentally, and spiritually. They affect our entire self, body and soul. We get depressed; anger and despondency take over; we lose sleep and appetite. The scandal of evil experienced in our very selves attacks frontally our faith and understanding of God. We suffer.

Thank God, we live in times where the psychological and medical sciences are well advanced and can offer excellent care and help to deal with the physical and psychological affliction; however, they are not capable of treating the ravages caused to the soul.

It takes a lot more persuasion to convince dis-

ciples of our Lord Jesus that they are healed: because the Christian is governed by faith.

We do not clip our human capacity for the unknown and spitefully restrict it to the mere material. Our highly developed sense of our finite nature, far from depressing us into intellectual laziness and angry agnosticism, opens our eyes to what is beyond our limits.

We see things in their proper dimension and purpose. We recognize the design God has for us which consists in loving Him above anything else. Through the Lord's blessing, we can transform all dimensions of our lives into extensions of His new covenant, and where suffering, injustice, and adversities abound, "*grace overflows all the more.*" (Romans 5.20)

A Christian's perspective and field of view is not limited to the timeline and horizon with which Satan tempts us to transform stones into bread, or to ridicule God's help and support promised to those who have put their faith in Him, or to reject God altogether from our world! (Matthew 4.1-11)

"Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and any one who has committed sins will be forgiven." (James 5.13-15)

In the kingdom of the Father which is avail-

able for all of us to enter into now, Christians see substantially beyond the empirical world and its comforts; the lineage of our divine bloodline from the altar of the Lord compels us to see as far as one can see through Faith, as far as one can see through Hope, and as far as one can see through Love.

As Far As One Can See...Through Faith

The Gospels tell us the many different ways the lives of the disciples were impacted by the sudden challenge of the Lord calling them to follow Him.

All of them were carrying on routine chores of their daily occupations: Andrew and his classmate listening to John the Baptist, their teacher (John 1.35); Simon Peter and his crew fishing, mending their nets (Mark 1.16-20); Matthew sitting at his tax collection desk (Mat 9.9); Nathanael-Bartholomew lounging under a fig tree (John 1.48-49), and so on.

Life, like destiny, cannot be planned in every detail. We may chart our lives in detail, towards a certain goal; however, the future remains unknown and challenges arise against our efforts to bring clarity and focus.

We work diligently to meet these challenges and overcome them: we go to school, we acquire skills necessary to reach our goals, we stay alert in order not to lose opportunities affording us ad-

vancement towards these goals. We feel justified pride when we achieve milestones on our journey: graduations, promotions, recognition of our accomplishments.

As we happily navigate our charted course, quite often—in the words of Saint Gregory of Nareg Prayer 25—squalls disrupt our pleasant stroll of spring days: some storms are health issues and suffering, others the onslaught of injustice, and yet others stabs of jealousy and human malice that buffet us from all sides.

What to do?

For health issues, of course we go to our physicians and follow their advice and medical prescriptions. These medications, though, cannot treat our shaken confidence: we need counseling to address the uncertainties, and guidance to come out of the sudden maze of hesitancy and doubt in which we find ourselves.

But what can be done to heal the totality of our individual human nature: my body, my soul, and my very self?

As a Christian, I am a member of a community not just called or gathered **around** our Lord Jesus Christ, but constituted in Him; existing in Him; receiving in Him the supernatural life-giving flow of His Holy Spirit.

This marvelous faith reality of “Church” (the Greek root means “belonging to the Lord”) makes us capable of calling on His and our Father and God, to ask for help and support.

As Far As One Can See...Through Hope

Christian hope is something more than the human psychological feeling of expectation and desire, because it is anchored not on human or natural capabilities, but on the power and faithfulness of the Most High; it is the assurance of the unfailing support and care of our heavenly Father:

“Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.” (Letter to Romans 5.2-5a)

Indeed, in the vocabulary of the Church Fathers “Divine Providence” means God. Our Lord Jesus emphasizes with particular fervor and emotion the power of His and our Father’s divine nursing and mindfulness:

“Look at the birds in the sky; they do not sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are not you more important than they? (...) Learn from the way the wild flowers grow. They do not work or spin. But I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was clothed like one of them.” (Matthew 6.26, 28-29)

In order to learn from the way the wild flow-

ers grow, we must train ourselves to see as far as hope can see...

Christian hope expands our prospect beyond the horizon of our finite nature into its original capacity of God's own image, superabundantly restored through the transplant of our Baptism into the Church, the body of our Lord Christ.

As Far As One Can See...Through Love

When we are caught up in misfortune and adversity, it seems to us the world around us rejoices, oblivious to our grief. It looks like we are left alone in carrying a cross exceeding our ability and competence. The resulting disorientation and mental/spiritual confusion makes it difficult to assess how things stand.

We can become completely absorbed in dealing with the challenges ahead of us, and we may not recognize the importance of talking with the Lord. It may not cross our minds to sit, like Mary, at the feet of Jesus and listen to His teaching, but rather to get busy, accomplishing tasks, getting things done, like Martha; it is helpful to be reminded of the answer the Lord gave her:

“Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10.38-42)

The Christian is trained in the school of Love; not human love and care, but God's all-powerful creative and uplifting gift of His very Self.

A few hours before His agony in the garden of Gethsemane, our Lord promised (John 14.16) not to leave us orphans, but to send the Spirit of truth as Comforter and Advocate.

The Lord's Spirit teaches us (John 14.17) to see pain and affliction in a perspective which the world does not possess nor can it accept:

"When a woman is in labor, she is in anguish because her hour has arrived; but when she has given birth to a child, she no longer remembers the pain because of her joy that a child has been born into the world." (John 16.21)

Paul the Apostle expands on these words of Jesus and concludes his instruction to the Romans on the foundation and source of our faith and hope stating:

*"(...) **because** God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us." (Letter to Romans 5.5)*

In the kingdom of God, Christians rejoice in the new life that pain and anguish brings forth, and they see again the Lord, and their hearts rejoice, and no one can take away their joy. (John 16.22)

Entering the Kingdom of God

Jesus began His ministry announcing that the kingdom of God was at hand, and that repentance was the requirement to be admitted. (Matthew 4.17)

The gate to the kingdom of God is open, the cherubim with fiery revolving sword (Genesis 3.24) have been summoned back, but it is narrow and few adventure through it because the way is hard (Matthew 7.14), and barely visible to the uninitiated.

Seen through the eyes of faith, hope, and love, illness, adversity, and misfortune become roads to conversion, because they cleanse and prepare us for the visitation of God.

Far from turning Christians away from the Lord's following, suffering brings them even closer to Him, because it institutes a communion with His Cross, both in the Lord's sacrificial pain and its redemptive power over evil and sin.

Upon entering this hidden door, we find the intimate connection of healing power and sacrifice: between the suffering which any challenge or adversity brings, and the repentance of the sacrament of confession. Both these realities—namely, suffering and repentance—admit us to the kingdom of God: the former through our participation in the suffering and death of our Lord on the Cross, and the latter through the merit of the Lord's very own sacrifice.

Wrapping up their first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas on the way back home stopped at Antioch in Pisidia:

“There they strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith, saying, ‘It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God.’”
(Acts, 14.22)

This is a remarkable expansion of the Lord’s proclamation with which He began His ministry: “Repent, the kingdom of God is at hand.” (Mark 1.15)

Based on their experience during their first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas equate “Repent” to “Many persecutions.”

The adversities and suffering they faced (Paul was left for dead after being stoned in Lystra—Acts 14.19) far from dissuading them from their purpose, strengthened them in understanding the meaning of misfortune and enmity, because through their faith they were capable of seeing far beyond any human horizon and limits.

They understood the true meaning and connection between difficulties, even dire straits like those signified in the powerful image of a dying grain of wheat, and bearing fruit in this new kind of kingdom. (John 12.24) By virtue of faith, hope, and love received in our baptism, we are endowed with the power to transform all domains of our lives into extensions of the New Covenant, springs of grace welling up to eternal life. (See John 4.14)

From Yoke to Our Cross

Repentance, thus, is the most adroit way to deal with challenges that rise on our way. It is the best method of conserving the eternal value encapsulated in each and every adversity and pain.

In the Old Covenant, hunger, thirst, nakedness, and being in need of everything was a sure sign of punishment imposed by God on those who were unfaithful; the image used is that of a yoke of iron put on the neck. (Deuteronomy 28.48)

This is not so in the New Covenant. The invitation of the Lord is to take upon us His yoke and learn from Him to be gentle and lowly of heart in order to find rest for our souls. (Matthew 11.29)

We must learn from the Lord how to transform all our human and transient anxieties into a spiritual treasure: the rate of such divine exchange is fixed in love; the more we love, the higher the exchange rate in our favor. (Luke 7.47)

Renouncing ourselves, taking up our cross and following the Lord (Mark 8.34) is the only way to find rest for our souls; it is the only effective way of dealing with any and all adversity coming our way.

The happiness of carrying in us the very spring of grace and communion with the Lord makes this yoke easy and this burden light. (Matthew 11.30)

The School of the Lord

At the school of repentance we learn to be gentle and lowly of heart.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew (5.3-7.27) summarizes the program of the Lord's school. The Beatitudes set the stage: blessed are those who earn treasures in heaven and have hearts attached only to the Lord; blessed are those who mourn, longing to be with the Lord; blessed are the meek and lowly of heart carrying their cross in the footsteps of the Lord; blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; blessed are the merciful, the pure of heart, the peacemakers, blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,

*"Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven."
(Matthew 5.11-12)*

Becoming the salt of the earth and the light of the world is the goal. We can attain this goal by examining ourselves every day not to be angry with and not to insult anyone around us, not to be vindictive, to love even our enemies; we can keep ourselves in shape through fasting, prayer, and almsgiving.

A pretty intensive course! But that's the only sure way of climbing the mount and sitting at the feet of the Lord to learn from Him; to **become**,

that is to be **transformed**, in a better analogy **trans-substantiated** into His disciples.

Exercises in the School of the Lord

Fasting

Fasting is the easiest and most practical way of associating us with the Lord—which is the meaning of picking up the yoke of His Cross side-by-side with Him—on our road of conversion and penance.

Patriarch Shenork Kaloustian of Istanbul was asked one day about Armenians' attitude towards fasting: "Armenians have solved that problem..." he quipped.

And that 'solution' (the Armenian word also means 'dilution'—the pun was surely intended) may very well be one of the main roots of our so many problems...

Our liturgical calendar marks the days on which we are invited through fasting to rekindle the memory of our Lord's betrayal by Judas (Wednesdays), and His crucifixion (Fridays), to accompany Him and help Him in carrying His Cross.

Taking the spark from a daily routine as ordinary as eating, we can transform our days into an excellent opportunity for prayerful meditation on the important tenets of our faith and morals. They give us a taste of eternal life, the haven of our earthly journey. Meditation on these tenets trains

us to find the correct proportion of our dignity and freedom, commensurate with the price paid for our salvation: *“You have been purchased at a price. Do not become slaves to human beings.”* (1 Corinthians 7.23)

Catholicos Hovhan Mandakuni (+490) explains that fasting is not only applicable to food; abstaining from sin is fasting, refraining from trivial talk is fasting; minding one’s business and not putting our nose in our neighbors’ affairs is fasting; keeping our eyes away from voyeurism, our ears from gossip, and our hearts from impure thoughts is fasting:

“It is fasting not to be after honors and authority, not growing angry, not screaming, not being jealous and not being vindictive, nor justifying the self to the neighbor. It is fasting not being greedy, (...) being humble is fasting, being obedient is fasting, loving everyone with sacred love is fasting.” (Sermons, Venice 1836, p. 24-25)

Prayer

I am curious what Patriarch Kaloustian would have answered to a question about Armenians’ attitude towards prayer...

It would be wonderful if we made a habit of praying some of the hours from The Order of Common Prayers (*Zhamagirk*). This prayer book was not intended only for monks in monasteries or priests in churches; it was intended for all the

faithful.

We can make a habit of praying the “Our Father” and hold it as a plan of action not only for our day, but for our entire life.

A major portion of our day, we will be walking through a Babylonian furnace of witnessed or heard evil; we can recite a “Glory be to the Father” to atone for each and every evil flame of curse words heard, even if it may be, to our judgment, an insignificant drop of water. Our God is generous and bountiful; it takes very little, not even the size of a mustard seed, to move Him into miraculous action.

Almsgiving

Christian almsgiving is not only giving away money, or contributing volunteer work to charitable causes launched by tax sheltered entities.

Christian almsgiving is a school where we learn not to offend our neighbor; it is an environment where we grow to become like our heavenly Father shining His sun on everyone, and showering His life-giving rain on all the earth.

In this school, raw stones of ostentatious and bad taste are ground down, polished and cut to reflect the brilliance of the original heavenly light on which our God stands to be worshiped and revered (Exodus 24.10). In this school, our understanding of freedom is tempered in such a way

that it does not become a stumbling block to the weak.

Almsgiving is the school where we learn about the true aim of our deeds and toiling: we learn here not to go around and do things aimlessly, but, in the words of Saint Paul, to conquer the eternal crown:

“Every athlete exercises discipline in every way. They do it to win a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one.” (1 Corinthians 9.25)

We must work very hard and for a very long time to finally grasp and understand that true almsgiving is recognizing the capabilities and graces of the people around us, and giving each and everyone the space to accomplish their gifts, because it is genuine almsgiving not to expropriate anyone, nor to commandeer their talents and contributions to the common good of the Body of Christ, which is the Church.

Christian almsgiving is a school where we learn how to truly love, that still more excellent way:

If I speak in human and angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge; if I have all faith so as to move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away everything I own, and if I hand my body over so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never fails. If there are prophecies, they will be brought to nothing; if tongues, they will cease; if knowledge, it will be brought to nothing. For we know partially and we prophesy partially, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.

When I was a child, I used to talk as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I put aside childish things. At present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face. At present I know partially; then I shall know fully, as I am fully known.

So faith, hope, love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” (1 Corinthians 13.1-13)

And lead us not into temptation...

Homiletics, the art of preaching, has exerted itself to exhaustion in trying to explain what exactly Jesus meant by this petition: Does our Father really lead us into temptation? Does He routinely take us by hand into temptation

so that we pray and ask Him not to lead us into temptation? And what exactly is the nature of this “temptation”? Any type of sin? Sin? Why would the Father lead us into sin?

In the harmonious symphony of this most sublime prayer given to us by our Lord, these words, if interpreted or explained in disharmony with the rest, would result in a very unhappy failure in understanding the original meaning correctly.

Indeed, James the Apostle writes about this point:

“Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one; but each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.” (James 1.13-14)

In the context of the “Our Father,” “temptation” has two complementary meanings: the first, a lack of trust towards the heavenly Father, about Whom Jesus taught *“What father among you, if his son asks for a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11.11-13)*. And the second, to understand God as someone who betrayed His own covenant and abandoned us against His promise to be with us; as if He deceived us.

When God brought the Israelites out of Egypt, the book of Exodus narrates the following episode: the people came to camp at Reph’idim and

ran out of drinking water; they began to complain and *“murmured against Moses, and said, ‘Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst?’*” (Exodus 17.3)

Moses cried to God for help, saying “the people are ready to stone me!” And God instructed him to take the rod with which he struck the Nile (Exodus 7.20) and strike the rock at Horeb; water came out and the people drank. Moses *“called the place Massa (tempted) and Meribah (contention), because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’*” (Exodus 17.7)

For the New Israel, the people redeemed with the blood of Jesus (the Church), “temptation” relates not to the messianic testing of the Lord in the desert, or any other scenario hatched by commentators, but to this precise meaning of doubting whether God has abandoned us against the letter and spirit of His New Covenant. Indeed, the entire chapter 6 of the Gospel according to John, where Jesus announces the good news of being with us as our bread and life, is developed on the matrix of the miracle of manna in the exodus desert; and Jews *“murmur”* here too, this time against Jesus.

The true nature of this temptation, therefore, consists in us testing the Father and doubting if He is still with us, Emmanuel (Isaiah 7.14; 8.8; Matthew 1.23), doubting if He is staying, making His home in us, which is the essence of the New Covenant, the Most Holy Trinity inhabiting His children.

In times of distress and anguish, we must re-

mind ourselves of the presence of the Lord in us. Trusting in our faith, hope and love, He may be sleeping in our boat, resting from His hard work of announcing the good news, but He is with us! Instead of murmuring, it might be better to be considerate and reciprocate His trust in us by letting Him rest from His long day and not wake Him up to help us! But it is okay to gently wake Him up, perhaps by paraphrasing Mary: "Lord, if You had been awake, this storm would not have happened..." (John 11.32)

Asking the Heavenly Father to Give Us the Holy Spirit

A prayer from the Zhamagirk (Prayer book)

Opening Prayer

Blessed is the Holy Spirit, true God. Amen.

Blessing

My constant pleading, O benevolent Lord, is that you cleanse me from my sins and keep your servants safe from the unknown!

Let us always entreat the Lord for peace; accept, save, and have mercy!

Praise and glory be to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and forever in all ages!

Psalm

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside still waters.

He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me;

Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

You anointed my head with oil; your cup like pure wine filled me with joy.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Proclamation

Let us always entreat the Lord for peace!

Let us with thankful prayer ask the benevolent Spirit God for mercy, so that in His goodness He may acquit us from the wrathful punishment for our trespasses.

Almighty Lord our God, save and have mercy on us!

Prayer

Accept our prayers, Holy Spirit, true God, and console your servants with your peace, which surpasses all understanding and insight. Acquit us in your goodness from the wrathful punishment for our trespasses; forgive us and hear our prayers, remit and expiate our sins!

Make us worthy to glorify you with thankful prayers together with the Father and only begotten Son, now and forever, and unto all the ages! Amen.



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