



When Clichés Don't Work

A few years ago, I received a letter from a pastor friend of mine whose son had been killed in an accident. He wrote, "In the past I've often encouraged people to let the Lord be their strength, to 'trust God,' to 'hang in there,' etc. For me, now, I know that I have no strength, I have none of the things that are necessary to deal with such an event as the loss of a son."

What do you do when the clichés don't work? When I was a young pastor, I went to visit a man who had been one of my "heroes" and a friend. He had been the pastor of large churches, an author of some note and a famous evangelical leader. I went to visit him because he had just been told that he was dying of cancer.

I was very young and had not, to that point, found out that God's servants also have "feet of clay." An older friend who had been to see him almost every day subsequent to the diagnosis of cancer tried to prepare me for my visit. He said, "Steve, have you ever had all of your security structure taken away? Have you ever been without any hope? Have you ever had every dream shattered and every desire destroyed?"

I admitted that I had never experienced that kind of pain. "Then," he said, "be careful that you don't judge too harshly when you see one of your heroes broken, bitter and without any hope."

What do you do when the clichés don't work? I don't know about you, but I grow tired of much of the teaching on the "victorious Christian life." Sometimes the "victorious Christian life" is simply being able to get out of bed in the morning or just keeping your nose above water. Sometimes, when your hope is gone and your pain is deep, there is very little victory. One just keeps groping around in the dark looking for light—any light.

When the clichés don't work, that's when you find out if what you have is real. When the clichés don't work, the genuine is tested. I have noticed that those Christians who go through the darkness and "keep on trucking" have some traits in common.

Honesty

First, there is honesty. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life" (2 Corinthians 1:8).

The old story about the Science of the Mind believer who found himself in hell and kept repeating over and over to himself, "It's not hot, and I'm not here. It's not hot, and I'm not here" is reflective of some Christians who go through the dark places. They keep saying they are fine when they aren't fine—they keep repeating the clichés over and over in hope that the repetition might make them real.

When I was a pastor, I would visit members of the church when they were in the hospital. In an effort to impress me with their spirituality, they tried to act calm and together. But, I remember one lady who, when I asked her if she was afraid said, "Of course I'm afraid! People die in hospitals!"

People who keep on trucking in the dark are honest with themselves, honest with God and honest with their brothers and sisters in Christ. They don't talk about how wonderful everything is.

Prepare for Hard Times

Secondly, people who somehow manage to get through the very hard times, prepare for the hard times before they come. The prophet Elisha, when asked

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he asked me to remind you

to prophesy for the three kings who were going to battle against Moab, gave them a message of preparation. He said: "This is what the Lord says: Make this valley full of ditches. For this is what the Lord says: You will see neither wind nor rain, yet this valley will be filled with water, and you, your cattle and your other animals will drink" (2 Kings 3:16-17).

Help From Friends

Thirdly, people who are able to "keep their nose above water" in hard times are often people who are willing to allow others to carry the load for a while. Paul told the Galatians, "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2).

Most Christians are better at ministering "unto" than in being ministered to. In other words, if we accept the support and comfort of others, it shows our weakness. For those of us in Florida who went through the devastating hurricanes a few years ago, it wasn't so much the loss or the hassle that bothered me. What really bothered me was the knowledge that I was helpless and that, as much as I didn't want to do it, I was going to be dependent on other people. I hated it.

It was good for me to look to brothers and sisters during that time—to have to lean on others for a while. You can get through most things "with a little help from your friends." But if your pride doesn't allow you to cry or be weak sometimes, there is a good possibility that the misery simply won't go away.

Fixin' a Fix

Fourthly, I've noticed that those who manage to get through the hard times aren't always trying to fix the problems. Paul showed this attitude when he wrote: "If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord" (Romans 14:8).

"Don't try to fix something that isn't broken," has been said so much I think I'll scream the next

time someone says it to me. Here's something that hasn't been said much: "Sometimes you shouldn't try to fix something that *is* broken." A friend of mine has a wonderful principle of life. If God fixes a fix to fix you, and you fix the fix before you are fixed, he'll fix another fix to fix you. In other words, *sometimes you better just leave it alone.*

I was flying back from Toronto once when we went through terrible turbulence. I sat next to a woman who slept through the whole thing. When we finally landed, she woke up. As she stretched after her rather long nap, I made some flippant comment like, "Are you crazy? We almost died a while back, and you were sleeping." She said something simple, yet profound. I've been thinking about it ever since. She smiled and said, "I can't fly this airplane."

There is a strange comfort when one has done all one can do. It is the comfort that says there are some problems that don't have solutions—"I can't fly this airplane."

Surprised by Grace

Finally, people who make it through the very difficult times are often surprised by God's grace and love. That's what happened with Thomas after the resurrection (John 20). He had lost everything he believed in, and he refused to accept clichés. Then Jesus came! He does, you know!

Let me give you one more quote from the letter from my pastor friend who lost his son. He said, "I can finally say with a little more integrity, the things that we preach, teach, counsel and share with others as we move through life (which is frequently filled with tragedy) are beyond the truth that we know them to be. These things that are precious and holy and into which the angels would love to inquire are more than true. They are more than experimental. They are the Holy gifts of a loving Father to us, his fragile children."

He asked me to remind you. □

—Steve Brown

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