

Rising Above Challenges

Sunday 6th March 2022

Readings: Psalm 91:1-16, Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Luke 4:1-13, Romans 10:8b-13

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What has been the biggest challenge in your life? Was it a medical challenge? Was it a financial challenge? Was it a moral question? Was it something that happened in your family? Was it forgiving someone? Every one of us faces challenges and sometimes they can take over our lives. Ok, so some of you have stopped listening to me already and are re-immersed in that great life challenge ... so snap out of it for a minute and come back ok?

Challenges are, believe it or not, good for us. They force us to face our current limitations and how to overcome them or they force us to take up a new view of life and ourselves. We once had a guy at school who would have loved to be an All Black. He had great expectations for himself coming from a privileged background. He'd never played rugby but at fifteen decided now was the time to start. It was a hard start. I'll never forget coming off the field at the end of a winter game where half the game was played in driving rain. It had been a hard fought, tough game and we were caked head to toe in mud. This guy, I won't use his name, came off the field at half time, and, with no exaggeration, he was wet but there was not a drop of mud on him. His white shorts were pristine. I remember just staring, gob-smacked, along with my teammates. The reality of the game had made him realise that it really wasn't for him and that was it. He found a new, more realistic focus. In the Scriptures we find many such stories ... the apostle Peter also an enthusiast found that walking on water wasn't too easy. Last week's readings, for those who followed them, reminded us the disciples' limitation in healing was linked to their self-interest. They couldn't heal a young man because they were too busy arguing about who was the greatest and were not focussed on the things of God. In the life of faith not only our enthusiasm can be challenged but also the things in life that we don't want to have challenged ... things like our self-identity, our self-reliance, our reticence to be involved or to really care for others. God challenges these things because God calls us to answer His call and His purpose for us and the world.

This week I was talking to a friend who shared that a few years ago the big change in his life came when he realized that he had to stop relying on his own abilities and focus first on what God wanted. He said that as he started doing this life got so much easier. He said it seemed so simple, yet he had missed it somehow as he had developed in faith. It wasn't that he had to do a lot ... just seek God first in everything. Life he says, is now so much better. He is living out Matthew 6:33, "... **seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well**" and finding it to be true.

When we turn to today's Scripture readings, which are the first Sunday in our walk towards Easter, we have to be taken by today's opening reading from Psalm 91 when we think of our COVID world. We heard the words from verse 3, "**Surely He will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence**" and from verse 10, "**no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent**". Interestingly when we look at the word for '**pestilence**' in verse 3 and '**disaster**' in verse 10 in the original Hebrew we could actually translate both of them, probably as, if not more accurately, '**plague**'. 'Pestilence' or דִּבְרָ, דְּבָר [deber /deh·ber/] in Hebrew, in verse 3 is used 49 times in the Old Testament, 47 of those uses it is normally translated 'plague'. Similarly, for 'disaster', the Hebrew נִגַּע [nega' /neh·gah/] is used 78 times, 65 times being translated as plague. Therefore, we could accurately read the text as "**Surely He will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly plague. No harm will overtake you, no plague will come near your tent**".

Does this provide us with a faith challenge? How do we read such a text? Does God divinely protect His people if we have enough faith? Does this mean we should ignore modern medicine and expect God to divinely heal us? Or is it a case of trusting God and taking all practical steps?

The story of the man crying out to God for help as he sat on a roof-top in the flood comes to mind. Some of you will know it. Probably after all the images of Australia this week you can picture it easily as well. Three times God sent things to help – a helicopter, a boat and a floating tree. The man ignored all three saying God would save him. Eventually the water covered the roof and the man drowned. After he arrived in heaven, the man immediately went and asked God why He hadn't saved him. God said He tried three times, but the man wasn't listening. God often asks us to act with what He has provided in the world. Even the Hebrew people in Egypt were asked to paint their doorways with blood before the angel of death came over, the last of the Egyptian plagues. God and the angels didn't need the markings – the Hebrews had to demonstrate both obedience and faith. What does this mean for us in a time of COVID? However, we act, whatever we do, must be from a position of faith.

The readings from Luke show that even Jesus faced very distinct and targeted challenges. We might note that Jesus' challenges came at a time when He was very tired and lacking in energy. I wonder how many of us don't do so well when we get over-tired? Who gets short, or frustrated easily, or angry when they are tired? I love that modern term I see applied to kids quite often of being 'hangry' – angry because they are hungry. Ok don't point fingers. I know I have to be careful when I'm over-tired and make sure I have space to recover. Jesus was no different. The devil knows when to attack. After a 40 day fast anyone would be run down. We need to know when we are likely to be at our weakest and that temptations will strike us and be aware.

Most of you will be well aware of the temptations that the devil threw at Jesus – turning stone to bread because He was hungry, worshipping the devil in return for all the kingdoms of the world and demonstrating that God would protect Him by throwing Himself off the top of the Temple. The temptations focused on making personal wants and needs more important than anything else (self-interest), turning from the worship of God for material gain (again self-interest) and thirdly to test God's faithfulness to Him (against self-interest). In all three of the temptations Satan tempted Jesus to give up all that was of God for His own personal aggrandisement. In essence it was the same deception that had worked with Adam and Eve. Take what you want and ignore what God has said, become like God. It is the same heresy that still abides in many of the cult groups and pseudo-Christian organisations today – the fallacy that we can become as God.

How did Jesus deal with such temptation? Jesus took His eyes, metaphorically, away from the temptation and instead focussed on what God had said. He did not let Satan away with distorting or corrupting the Word of God but rather, because Jesus spent time in God's Word, in prayer and contemplation on God's Word. He wasn't fooled by deceptions. The Word had truly become flesh. Jesus realised exactly how temporary the rewards were that Satan was offering. Satan would be a defeated enemy and any offerings he could make in the immediate would become void. The way of lies and violence has no good outcome. In faith, Jesus turned from the immediate temptation to the greater picture that God had invited Him to be part of.

We might also note that the result of Jesus' faith in facing temptation was two-fold. On one hand, once He had achieved this victory, we see that Jesus' ministry commences. God opens new doors for us when we demonstrate faithfulness. On the other we see that it also opens new periods of persecution and rejection. Like us, Jesus did not win a single victory and that was it. He had to win multiple battles small and large, often on a daily basis. He grew in His person and in His ministry as He did so. So too do we.

So, how do we rise above the challenges before us, whether they are internal or external? Like Jesus we have to come back to some basic questions: what does God's Word say about who I am in Christ and how I am to act? How do I become more like Jesus? Would I see Jesus making the choices I'm making? We also need to keep our eyes on the end goal and know that God loves us and always comes through for us as we hold onto Him. We are here for the long game, not the short, and, as we rise any challenge before us, like Jesus, we keep our eyes on the One waiting for us at the finish line. Amen.