

If You Think You Have Troubles, Meet St. Paul

I once had a conversation with a man who said that being a Christian was the best thing that ever happened to him. He was never as successful in business, never as prosperous and satisfied with his life as he was now that he had come to know Jesus.

“How about you?” he asked. “Do you feel the same way?”

I have to admit, I felt uneasy about the question. Yes, I said, I can't imagine life without Jesus, but I don't think being a Christian is easy. There are times when personal troubles can get the best of me, and I wonder why God allows them to happen. I know Murphy's Law is right: “If anything can go wrong, it will.” But I also know O'Toole's Law which says “Murphy was an optimist.”

We all hurt, don't we, and being a Christian doesn't mean you hurt any less than anyone else. Divorce, separation, financial blowouts, failure at school, loss of a job, or the death of a loved one can send the best of us into despair. Remember C.S. Lewis? When his wife Joy died, he sighed, “Love and your heart may be broken.”

I've known Christians to lose their faith when their child died or their marriage ended. I've know Christians who have lost hope after being laid off from work or being forced into bankruptcy. “I thought God was going to make it all work out,” they cry, as they sift through the ashes of a destroyed house after a fire, sign the divorce papers, or cope with a child on drugs. “How God could let this happen to me?”

That's a good question, isn't it? How could God let this happen to me? Isn't being a Christian supposed to mean no pain or sorrow, just a lot of joy and happiness? Isn't Christ supposed to deliver us from suffering, not cause more of it? Well, if you think that way, meet St. Paul.

Remember before his conversion, when Paul was Saul of Tarsus. He was a rising star in Judaism: a strict Pharisee, zealous for the law, a student of the best scholar of his time. If only he had stayed on course, success was guaranteed. But something happened to Saul on that road to Damascus. He came to recognize Jesus as Lord, surrendered his life to Jesus and resolved to obey him in every area of life. From that moment on, Paul's world turned upside down.

Now you might think that Paul's becoming a Christian would lead to a whole new successful career. But it didn't happen that way. God said to Ananias, “I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.” Imagine that! Paul becomes a Christian only to find that God has called him to suffer. And suffer he does.

In his Second Letter to the Corinthians he recounts some of his troubles: “Five times I have received... the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my

own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea; danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked” (2 Cor. 11:24-27).

If this was his experience, how did he make it? What kept him from getting bitter? What made him endure without losing heart? It was simply this: Paul understood suffering was a way to witness to Jesus. He found in every disappointment, in every unexpected turn in life, an opportunity to speak out all the more for his God. In Second Corinthians 12:9, Paul articulates his secret: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

Paul suffered not with the kind of suffering the stoic advocated which was the best the ancient world could come up with – “Just grin and bear it; and if you can’t grin and bear it, grit your teeth and bear it; but bear it.” Paul suffered with a kind of bubbling openness which invited people to ask, “How do you do it, Paul?” This was one of the ways he witnessed for his Lord – by the way he bore his trouble.

There is no more profound statement in the New Testament of the power of God working in a believer than Paul’s statement in Second Corinthians 12:10: “For when I am weak, then I am strong.” Paul kept his eye on God’s available power.

There is story about a young man who did odd jobs for an experienced painter. The work included using an old, big, heavy extension ladder made out of wood. One day the painter invited the young man to climb the ladder with paint brush and can. The painter said to the young man, “Harold, I’ll tell you a secret. When you get up on that high ladder, you’re going to look down and it’s going to be higher than you thought. When that happens, don’t look up – the clouds will move and you will think you’re falling. Don’t look at the trees, the wind will shake them – and you’ll think you’re falling. Don’t look down; this is what scared you in the first place. Look way out – find a place where you can see the horizon, look at it and it won’t move. Keep your eyes fixed on the horizon, back down the ladder until your feet feel the ground.”

In a way, that’s what Paul did. Paul kept his eye on what Jesus had done for him, and this steadied him in time of trouble.

Do you want a sense of personal victory in your own life – despite all your circumstances? Someone is saying, “I wish I had more faith.” You don’t need more faith. You need to put the faith you’ve got to work in specific ways. Paul provides the model. He said “YES” to two things.

The first “YES” – “Paul, will you accept what you can’t change?”

“Of course,” he said.

A sign on a flower pot said, “You’ve got to bloom where you’re planted because that’s the only place you can grow.” Paul believed that. He had to work where he was, with the

people he had. He simply wouldn't sit around bemoaning the fact that he ran into opposition or that his mission in one city didn't produce much results. He simply went on with his life.

Our world is filled with people who, having undergone a traumatic, catastrophic event, try to go back like it was – instead of understanding that you can't go back, you can only go forward. At some point, you have to step out in faith, trust God and move on with your life.

The second “YES” – “Will you focus on what is really important in life?”

As Paul was languishing in prison under the sentence of execution, he looked back on his life as a Christian with some satisfaction. He wrote in his last epistle before his death: “I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith” (2 Tim. 4:7).

My mother's favorite saying when I was growing up was, “What's it going to matter a hundred years from now?” It wasn't very comforting advice at the time, but there is wisdom in her reply. Maturity, in Christian terms, is being able to discern life from an eternal perspective, and make our choices accordingly. When you examine the things we spend our time, money and energy on, what will it really matter a hundred years from now? Paul knew that. He knew what is really important is to maintain your integrity, persevere as best you can, and keep the faith. God may not spare you trouble, but God does promise to get you through it.

Avery Dulles is one of the great Roman Catholic theologians of the 20th century. He was born into two prominent American families of Presbyterian clergy, lawyers and politicians. His grandfather and great-grandfather were eminent Presbyterian ministers. Another grandfather was Secretary of State under President Benjamin Harrison and a great-uncle was Secretary of State under President Woodrow Wilson. Dulles' own father was John Foster Dulles – Secretary of State under President Eisenhower. His uncle was Alan Dulles, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency under President Kennedy.

Avery Dulles had a privileged background, including attending Harvard University. He was destined for greatness in the world of politics or law, but instead, after his conversion to Roman Catholicism, chose to become a Jesuit priest. As a Jesuit he would spend the rest of his life teaching theology in various faculties around North America.

Avery Dulles was made a Cardinal by Pope John Paul II in 2001. And yet, he remained an incredibly humble man with a deep devotion to Jesus. In his last lecture before his death, he said, “The most important thing about my career of many years, I feel sure, is the discovery of the pearl of great price, the treasure hidden in the field, the Lord Jesus himself.”

Like St. Paul, Avery Dulles stayed faithful to Jesus to the very end of his life. He died after a long, disabling illness on December 12, 2008. In his last months, he could neither stand nor eat, neither speak nor write. In his final lecture, which had to be delivered for

him, he closed by confessing his acceptance of “suffering and diminishment as normal ingredients of life, especially in old age.” As he concluded his lecture, Cardinal Dulles, in the spirit of St. Paul, said these words:

“As I become increasingly paralyzed and unable to speak, I can identify with the many paralytics and mute persons in the Gospels, grateful for the loving and skillful care I receive and for the hope of everlasting life in Christ. If the Lord now calls me to a period of weakness, I know well that his power can be made perfect in infirmity. ‘Blessed be the name of the Lord!’” (1)

Dear people, take a lesson from St. Paul. Keep the faith no matter what. Trust God amidst all the ups and downs of life. Focus on Jesus even as the world around you starts to shake. God will not spare you from trouble, but God will see you through it. Life can be tough for the best of us, but we are upheld by the everlasting arms of a God who loves us, always and forever. Amen.

Dr. Gary Nicolosi

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Text – Acts 9:1-19

Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul

1. Avery Dulles, “A Life in Theology” in *America*, April 21, 2008, 12. See also Patrick Carey, A Model Theologian in *Fordham*, winter 2008, 24-29.