

Act 11:19–30

Slings and Arrows of Outrageous Fortune

Introduction

You've heard the saying, "life is hard". It's true. The nature of our hardships vary, as do the intensity and constancy of them. But whether young or old, whether not getting for Christmas something you wanted, the loss of a loved one, a job, or life itself: everyone knows hardship in some fashion.

Hardship is something about which the early Christians in Acts knew. They were opposed by the Sanhedrin, even being beaten by them. They had internal problems with disgruntled widows and hypocritical Ananias and Saphira. Stephan is martyred. Saul ravages the church. Gentiles start getting converted! And we come to 11:19.

So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch.

This is just the barest mention of hardship, a short phrase. But it is loaded with meaning. And there are, in the consideration of these things, lessons for us. We will be looking at verses 19–30 under three headings.

1. The cause of hardships
2. Two possible responses to hardships
3. Two possible outcomes of hardships

Hardships' Causes

Paying special attention to the word translated "persecution" in verse 19, we get some insight into hardship in life. The root is used 58 times and depending on context, it can be translated "trouble", "tribulation", "affliction",

“oppression”, “distress”, “suffering”, “anguish”. The basic meaning is “pressing together”, as when Mark records that “a large crowd was following [Jesus] and pressing in on Him”.¹

I’m using the word “hardship” because it seems to include this whole breadth of meaning of being between a rock and a hard place.

- The word is used three times regarding the so-called “great tribulation”.²
- The word refers to physical pain, as when a woman is in labor.³
- It refers to mental distress, such as might cause tears, or take away one’s peace.⁴
- It refers to externally caused hardships, such as famine.⁵
- It certainly refers to hardships incurred because of our faith—persecution.

In fact, if we look at all the uses of the word, it ultimately refers to all the vicissitudes of life: physical and spiritual, internal and external.

So what? Here’s the “so what”. In the end, there is only one cause of the hardships of this life: the fall, the betrayal of all humanity in the sin of Adam and Eve. That long-ago event has real and abiding impact on creation in general and humanity in particular. Paul puts it this way.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons ...⁶

Every pain of the body and distress of the soul: every persecution, physical weakness, unfair accusation, wars, earthquakes, spiritual doubt, broken relationship, every one of “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune”,⁷ including physical death—they all derive from Adam’s and Eve’s rebellion. In

¹ Mark 5:24.

² Matthew 24:21; Revelation 2:22, 7:14.

³ John 16:21.

⁴ 2 Corinthians 2:4, John 16:33.

⁵ Acts 7:10–11.

⁶ Romans 8:19–23.

⁷ From William Shakespeare’s play Hamlet, Act III, Scene I, the soliloquy beginning “to be, or not to be”.

fact, when we think about the hardships of life, the implications of the fall are so obvious in Scripture, we should be able to say with Peter:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.⁸

We—and perhaps this is primarily true in western culture—seem surprised by hardship, death, opposition, or persecution. Why? Knowing what we know of Scripture, what did we expect?

It's a broken world; we are a broken people and we must live with the consequences of those facts.

Hardships' Possible Responses

This leads me to my second point; namely, there are two and only two possible responses that we can have to hardship.

Running From God

One response is that we can run away from God. Jesus refers to this in the parable of the sower.

When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when affliction or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word.⁹

Jesus mentioned three things that can keep us away from God:

1. lack of understanding of “the word of the kingdom”—ignorance of God’s

⁸ 1 Peter 4:12.

⁹ Matthew 13:19–22.

word,

2. difficulties or persecution because of the word, or,
3. the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choking out the word.

Following Christ can lead us to strange places. He can lead us to tell the truth, when any other person would lie. He can lead us to stay in a marriage, when all of our friends advise us to leave. He can lead us onto paths more risky, apparently less rewarding, and apparently more insane than anything a person who is not following Christ would do.

When everyone else is going left, Jesus could well lead us to go right. While everyone else is on the wide and easy path, as Jesus puts it: “the gate is small and the way is **narrow** that leads to life, and there are few who find it”.¹⁰

Ignorance of God’s word, opposition because of God’s word, or simply the ups and downs of life can lead one to run away from God. That’s one possible response.

Running Toward God

But that’s not what we see in Acts 11! Instead we see this response in 19–20.

Those who were scattered because of the persecution[/affliction/hardship] ... made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus.

Let this sink in. These followers of Christ had been forcibly removed from Jerusalem—from familiar language, people, and culture—to modern day Lebanon, to southern Turkey, and to an island 100 miles off the coast in the Mediterranean Sea. After Stephen’s preaching and death and the attacks that ensued after those events some three years prior, there had been no let up on these Jesus-followers.

Everyone has to deal with raising children, finding jobs, housing,

¹⁰ Matthew 7:14.

interpersonal conflicts, ill health, financial worries—fill in the blanks. But on top of all those normal things that afflict humanity, these disciples had lost all that was familiar and well-established: jobs, friends, and loved ones. They feared being killed for their faith. They had to deal with new languages and cultures. And yet, the very person—Jesus—who had gotten them into their hardships is still the object of their loyalty, obedience, and faith!

We find these early brothers and sister running *towards* Jesus—so to speak—rather than running away from him. I know that this seems crazy. So have other believers over the centuries. The story has been told of St. Teresa of Avila¹¹ regarding her view of hardships.

As she founded and visited convents, Teresa often traveled the rugged roads of Spain. One time her saddle slipped, and she found herself head down under the belly of a donkey as she crossed a stream. Complaining to the Lord of her treatment, she heard him reply, “Teresa, whom the Lord loves, he chastises. This is how I treat all my friends.” She replied tartly, “No wonder you have so few!”¹²

But still she and many others over the millenia have persevered in this faith of hardships, and for good reason.

Hardships’ Possible Outcomes

Why should we pursue the path of discipleship? That question leads to the third point, namely; there are two possible outcomes in one’s response to hardship. Each of these outcomes have both temporal and eternal consequences.

Running From God

One response, I’ve said, is that hardship can make us run away from

¹¹ 28 March 1515–4 October 1582, “was a prominent Spanish mystic, Roman Catholic saint, Carmelite nun and author during the Counter Reformation, and theologian of contemplative life through mental prayer.” See the Wikipedia article: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teresa_of_Ávila.

¹² www.paceminterris.org/experience-pacem/the-hermitages/st-teresa-of-avila .

following Jesus. What are the outcomes for that path?

There are temporal consequences. Let's remember that they who run away from God still have all the difficulties, hardships, afflictions, fears, and conflicts of life that everyone else has, whether follow of Jesus or not.

Now, it's true that they don't have persecution because of the word of God. But they also do not have God to walk alongside them. They do not have the practical wisdom of Scripture. They do not have the encouragement and help of other believers.

Those who run from God also forfeit eternity. They will ultimately be like those weeds to which Jesus refers in another parable when he tells his reapers, "gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned ...".¹³ Those are the eternal consequences.

And because they have forfeited eternity, they also have forfeited hope, purpose, and meaning. There is no assurance of any eventual good outcome. All they have are the normal hardships of life, their own personal grit and perseverance, and then death.

Running Toward God

But that's not what we see in Acts 11! We see at least six powerful outcomes for those who ran toward God in hardship, rather than away.

1. God's favor: "The hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord." (21) "Considerable numbers were brought to the Lord." (24) That's a great way to overcome persecution, by the way! Bring the enemy over into Christ's camp!
2. Joy: "The news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch. Then when he arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced." (22-23)
3. Help/encouragement from Jerusalem: "When he arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he ... began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord." (23)
4. Renewed relationship and ministry with Saul: "[Barnabas] left for Tarsus

¹³ Matthew 13:30.

to look for Saul; and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch.” (25–26) Paul’s later effectiveness might never have come to pass, had Barnabas not had this opportunity to seek him out.

5. Increased maturity: “For an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers.” (26) History tells us that Antioch was a major seat of the faith until the 15th century, perhaps because of the work of Barnabas and Paul in their midst.
6. Increased ministry: “Agabus stood up and began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world ... And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea. And this they did.” (Acts 11:28–30)

The outcomes were powerful and useful, giving personal joy and historic value, all because hardship did not cause these early Christians to run away of God, but rather toward him.

Conclusion

Do you understand the value of hardship?

- That we have hardships should be no surprise. That’s the result of the fall and it describes the condition of all creation.
- Of the two possible responses, which is yours? Do you run away from God in unbelief, or do you flee towards him?
- Of the possible outcomes, what do you see in your life?

It’s counter-intuitive, I know. I remember having a conversation with a non-practicing Jewish woman who asked me about joy. I told her that some of the sweetest moments in my life with God had been when he forced me to my knees through hardship. I don’t doubt that the woman thought I was a bit off.

That doesn’t mean that hardships are sweet. They’re not. That’s why the root can be translated as “trouble”, “affliction”, “oppression”, “distress”, “suffering” and so on. Hardships are hard!

But the outcomes are very valuable. Think of the six I mentioned earlier. Peter

takes up this idea.

In this [gracious salvation from God through Christ] you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls.¹⁴

Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

Through many dangers, toils and snares ...

- Hardships' Cause
 - "Persecution" in 11:19 has several meanings, including?
 - Physical: example?
 - Spiritual: example?
 - Internally caused: example?
 - Externally caused: example?
 - Ultimately, what is the cause of hardship in this life (Romans 8:19–23)?
- Hardships' Possible Effects
 - Running _____
 - Running _____
- Hardships' Possible Outcomes

¹⁴ 1 Peter 1:3–9.

- For those running _____, includes temporal and eternal:
- For those running _____, includes temporal and eternal, including:
 -
 -
 -
 -
 -
 -
- What is the value of hardship?