

Four Challenging Positions Of Faith

Text: Various

I. INTRODUCTION

A. "IT'S GONNA HURT!"

1. Did you ever look down the road to see something that means trouble in the distance?
 - a. It may be a police roadblock ahead and you forgot your driver's license;
 - b. Or a final exam ahead and you forgot to study;
 - c. Or you have to give a speech and you're afraid you won't even remember your own name.
 - (1) Most of us know what it's like to sit in the waiting room of a dentist's office waiting to have canal work done.
 - (2) We know that eventually that sore tooth is going to feel better...
 - (3) But in the meantime the noise of the drill coming from the other room sounds like someone is hanging shelves and we cringe at the anticipated pain.
2. Life is full of these horrible expectations.
 - a. Unfortunately, we sometimes blow them all out of proportion.
 - (1) We can turn a scary little fantasy into a full-fledged Frankenstein if we let our imaginations run wild.
 - (a) On the other hand, if we just grit our teeth and say, "**Hey, I'm gonna get through it,**" we usually do.
 - 1) Shun Fujimoto did!

3. Shun was one of the greatest gymnasts in the world.
 - a. He was a member of the Japanese Olympic gymnastics team that was within grasping distance of a gold medal.
 - b. Shun knew that he had trained for the better part of his young life for this moment and he knew that his teammates needed him.
 - (1) He mounted the rings, performed his breathtaking routine and dismounted.
 - (2) When he landed he broke his right leg and collapsed on the mat in excruciating pain.
 - (3) That night his teammates visited him in the hospital and offered their support.
 - (4) The next day when Shun's name was routinely called over the arena's public address system during competition, to everyone's surprise, a limping Shun emerged from the athlete's entrance tunnel and mounted the rings.

4. With the audience riveted in gasping disbelief, there he was poised on the rings wearing a cast on his right leg.
 - a. Could he carry that extra, unbalancing weight through his routine of flying, soaring and twisting?
 - b. It would be a superhuman physical feat if he could.
 - (1) He knew that the accomplishment of such a feat would meet with not only cheers, applause and perhaps a gold medal, but also with razor-sharp, stabbing, mind-numbing pain throughout his whole body, because the cast on his leg surely would collapse on the landing.
 - (2) Shun not only had to perform with his leg in a cast, but that night in the hospital he had meticulously figured out that he also had to achieve a score of 9.5 out of 10.0 in order to do his part towards winning the gold medal for the team.

5. Suddenly, Fujimoto began his routine and faultlessly performed the aerial ballet on the rings.
 - a. The crowd and the judges were amazed and enthralled.
 - (1) As he finished his routine, he sailed off the rings, did a double twist followed by a triple somersault, and landed like an arrow embedded in its target.
 - (2) With tears streaming down his cheeks, he stood ramrod straight, the sign that he had finished his routine.
 - (3) He then collapsed and his teammates carried him off the floor, his broken leg in a now shattered cast.
 - (4) The scoreboard flashed 9.5 – his team won the gold medal!
 - (a) Later Shun said, ***“The pain shot through me like a knife. It brought tears to my eyes. But now I have a gold medal and the pain is gone.”***

6. The next time you’re faced with something difficult, even though “it’s gonna hurt,” grit your teeth and get through it.
 - a. There is always something good at the end!

B. THE RESOURCES TO HANDLE PAIN

1. It is important to remember that Jesus Christ gives us the resources to handle the positions of pain in life.
 - a. When your faith is challenged by circumstances that bring pain into your life, God has provided us with His Spirit – the Comforter – to enable us to endure and overcome the frustrations we are faced with!

2. To be sure, the Church does not really have a mission...
 - a. It is God’s mission in the world that has the church!
 - (1) God is already active in the world.
 - (2) He will not be without a witness.

- (3) The Gospel is a work in the world today.
 - (a) The job of the Church is to discover and recognize the work of God that is already going on in the world!

- 3. God's mission in the world is to save the world.
 - a. That is the business we are in – the world-saving, world-shaking, world-shaping, world-making business!
 - (1) That is why John Wesley made every member of his churches pledge and pray to ***“save this nation and spread Scriptural holiness”*** throughout the earth.

- 4. Ursula K Le Guin distinguishes between “making a new world” and “making a world new.”
 - a. As a science-fiction writer, she confesses to spending a great deal of time “making a new world,” fashioning imaginary worlds for the mind to play in.
 - (1) But there is also the work of the “religious imagination,” which she calls “making the world new,” or “making the world different.” **(Ursula K. Le Guin, *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places* [New York: Grove Press, 1989], pg. 46).**

- 5. If the Church is to “make the world new,” maybe it’s time for the Church to stop putting crosses on top of its buildings, up above the fray...
 - a. Or, on its sacred altars, protected inside from the outside world...
 - (1) Maybe it’s time to start bearing on our bodies the marks of the Cross!
 - (2) Maybe it’s time to put our minor differences and our career-climbing aside and do some world-saving for Christ!

- 6. **Listen:** this is the only excuse for the Church’s existence:

- a. To change the course of history – like others who have gone on before us!
 - (1) ...People like Abraham and Abigail and Elijah and Esther and Jonah...
 - (a) We must work to redeem the world from death and destruction!

- 7. Let's be clear: We are not called to save the world's powers and principalities.
 - a. Those powers and principalities, which we fight against in the spirit realm, are decrepit and sick unto death!
 - (1) The world will want us to save its powers and principalities, but we are called to reveal to the world a different power and a different principality.
 - (2) We are called to reveal God's power and God's principality that stands in direct contrast to the world's powers and principalities.
 - (a) All of the Farm-aid and the Live-aid and the AIDS-aid are but BAND-AIDS without this alternative reality!

- 8. John Mack is a Pulitzer-Prize winning psychologist and Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School.
 - a. He confesses to being surprised by ***“how many of the political and intellectual leaders [he] admire for their efforts on behalf of human life have spent time in prison...”***
 - (1) ***Facing up to the established order, taking a stand with one's whole being, exposing one's vulnerability, and risking the loss of personal freedom all seem to inspire both leaders and their followers,”*** (quoted in John E. Mack, **Blowing the Western Mind – An Essay**).

- 9. Was it not Jesus of Nazareth who said:
 - a. “Yes, you will suffer...”

- b. “Yes, you will be delivered to the jailers...”
- c. “Yes, you will be put in prison...”
- d. “Yes, you will be persecuted in this world – even unto death...”
 - (1) ***“But be of god cheer!”***
 - (2) ***“I have overcome the world...”***
 - (a) **Matthew 10:22 – *“And ye shall be hated of all men for my name’s sake: but he that endureth to the end shall be saved.”***
 - (b) Because of your endurance – because of your willingness to suffer for the sake of the Name of the Lord, you will gain eternal life!

10. There are dozens of prison stories in the Bible.

- a. Today I am going to share with you four prisoners who became world-changers.
 - (1) Each one suffered a particularly challenging trial of their faith; and they each were placed in a distinct position when their faith was challenged.
 - (a) And, each man’s particular position during their trials depicts a necessary position required of a world-shaking, world-saving church or church leader.

II. **BODY**

A. **KNEELING IN THE MIRE**

- 1. First, there is the weeping prophet, Jeremiah, kneeling in the mire (Jeremiah 37-38).
 - a. Allow me, if you will, to share some brief history with you...

2. The Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, had made Zedekiah, who was king Josiah's son, king of Judah.
 - a. Zedekiah, who along with his officials and the rest of Judah, refused to obey the Word of the Lord, had asked Jeremiah to pray to God on behalf of the nation.
 - b. Jeremiah did as requested and the Lord told him that, even though the Egyptian army would help Judah fight the Babylonians and possibly wound many, once the Egyptians left, the Babylonians would return to attack and capture the city and burn it to the ground.
 - (1) When Jeremiah saw the Babylonian army retreating from Jerusalem because the Egyptian army was approaching, he started to leave in order to take possession of his share of the family property.
 - (2) When he reached the Gate of Benjamin, however, the officer in charge accused Jeremiah of deserting to the Babylonians.
 - (3) In spite of his protests, Jeremiah was arrested and taken to what would amount to the Police.
 - (4) The police were furious with him, so they beat him and threw him into prison.
 - (5) Jeremiah 37:16 explains that he was put in an underground cell and kept there a long time.
3. Eventually, King Zedekiah sent for Jeremiah and asked him privately, ***"Is there any message from the Lord?"***
 - a. Jeremiah answered honestly and said, ***"There is. You will be handed over to the king of Babylon."***
 - b. And then Jeremiah pleaded his case with the king and begged him not to send him back to the prison in Jonathan's house he had just come out of, stating that he was sent back, he (Jeremiah) would surely die there.
 - c. So King Zedekiah ordered Jeremiah locked up in the palace courtyard and was fed bread until all the bread in the city was gone.

4. The 38th chapter of Jeremiah opens up with some officials getting wind of what Jeremiah had been prophesying and they told the king, “This man has got to go! Please kill this man; he is ruining the resolve of our soldiers!”
 - a. King Zedekiah caved in and gave them permission to handle Jeremiah however they saw fit.
 - b. So they took Jeremiah and threw him into the cistern of the king’s son.
 - (1) Jeremiah 38:6 explains that there wasn’t any water in the cistern, only mud; and Jeremiah sank into the mud.

5. Now, it is important to visualize exactly what kind of prison it was that Jeremiah was locked up in.
 - a. Jeremiah was thrown into a mire pit that was dug out of limestone rock and consisted of a narrow neck, perhaps three feet across and three or four feet in depth.
 - b. That opened to a larger underground cavernous vault.
 - (1) In other words, the place was an underground cistern, shaped like a bottle and covered by a stone.
 - (2) Jeremiah had little or no space to either rise or stand up, and there was not enough space to sit or lie down comfortably, either.
 - (3) All he could do was to kneel in the mire.

6. This dark, filthy, gloomy prison had no water in it; in fact, had the cistern not been emptied of water, Jeremiah would have surely drowned.
 - a. There was only mud, muck and mire everywhere, and eventually a weary Jeremiah would have succumbed and been unable to survive.

7. An Ethiopian by the name of Ebed-melek, who was a servant in the king’s palace, begged the king to save Jeremiah from suffocating to death in the mud

- a. Later, because of this Ethiopian's kindness to Jeremiah, Ebed-melek's life was spared (Jeremiah 39:15-18).
8. You can be sure, my dear friends, that you are going to face a challenging trial in your life that will make you feel as though you have been thrown into a muddy cistern with little room for anything more than kneeling.
- a. You are going to feel as though you are sinking in the mud and mire of your dire situation, and all you can do is fall to your knees...
 - (1) Listen, while you are there on your knees, remind yourself that God has a servant in the palace – a friend in the house of God – who is petitioning the King of kings on your behalf!
 - (2) Never doubt that while you are suffering in your cistern of despair, when you are convinced that you will die in your dilemma, God has placed a person in your life that will petition the powers of heaven for your deliverance!
 - (a) You have a church family that will support you and go to the Throne of God for you until your victory is secured!
 - (b) Everybody has an Ebed-melek in the church – and if you don't know who that person is in your life right now, you need search until you find that one who will plead your case when you can't do so for yourself!
 - 1) And if you are that Ebed-melek for another, just know that what goes around comes around, and God will see to it that you are rewarded for your efforts.
9. Jeremiah's challenging position of faith was that of prayer – kneeling in the mire until released into his miracle.

- a. If that's where you find yourself – kneeling in the mire – pray until you are released into the realm of the miraculous!

(1) *“They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength...”*

B. WALKING IN THE FIRE

1. The story of the three Hebrew children – Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Daniel 3) is one of the most dramatic stories in all the Old Testament.
 - a. It depicts the second challenging position of one's faith – that of walking in the fire.
 - (1) These three bureaucrats stood up to a king that was so powerful he would rightfully be considered the conqueror of the world.
 - (a) As a result, they were thrown into a fiery furnace – one that was heated up seven times hotter than normal!
2. It is important to understand that the central message of challenging position of faith is NOT that “our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the fiery furnace” (and He most assuredly is!).
 - a. Rather, the message is that in the midst of that furnace, God will be with us!
 - (1) We will not be left alone when our faith is tried by fire!
 - (2) God will be present with us in the midst of our deepest need, enabling us to “walk in the midst of the fire.”
 - (3) Indeed, God will send heavenly messengers to walk with us in the heat – He will send His angels to encamp round about us as our comforting companions!
 - (a) These God-given companions that comfort us when we find ourselves in

the challenging position of faith's fiery furnace will be our source of strength and comfort when there seems to be no rhyme or reason to the trial!

3. The one message I want to share with you about the fiery furnaces of life that try our faith is a simple one:
 - a. Never complain when you are in the midst of the flames, for that is the best place you could possibly be!
 - (1) Remember, the men who were in the midst of the flaming furnace were walking around and a fourth man was with them – and “the form of the fourth [man] is like the Son of God”!
 - (2) They were fine!
 - (a) In fact, the Bible says that King Nebuchadnezzar called them forth out of the midst of the flames;
 - (b) And when they emerged from the furnace, ***“the princes, governors, and captains, and the king’s counselors...saw these men, upon whose bodies the fire had no power, nor was an hair of their head singed, neither were their coats changed, nor the smell of fire had passed on them.”***
 - (c) Upon witnessing this, Nebuchadnezzar said, ***“Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who hath sent his angel, and delivered His servants that trusted in Him, and have changed the king’s word, and yielded their bodies, that they might not serve nor worship any god, except their own God.” (Daniel 3:27-28).***
 - 1) But the Bible says that the heat of said furnace killed the men

who had apprehended them and threw them into the furnace!

- 2) So, the BEST place you can be when faced with the possibility of your faith being challenged in the fire is right there in the midst of it!

C. SINGING IN THE STOCKS

1. The third challenging position of faith that I want to share with you today is that of SINGING IN THE STOCKS.
 - a. Being stuck in the stocks is inevitable, but it's what you do while you are bound that determines the outcome of your situation!
2. Paul and Silas encountered some trouble in Philippi with some of the town's leading citizens, because they had liberated a slave girl that was possessed with a spirit of divination, thereby eliminating her income-producing potential as a freak sideshow (Acts 16:16-40).
 - a. Paul and Silas had done something good for her spiritually, but it was bad for her owners financially, since her condition of being devil-possessed could no longer be exploited for financial gain.
 - (1) You know, it's funny what some people will do to secure a few dollars!
3. Well, because Paul and Silas had, through the authority of Jesus' name, delivered this young lady of the demon that had possessed her, the authorities stripped and beat them, and then threw Paul and Silas into a dungeon.
 - a. Their hands and feet were fastened into heavy wooden stocks.
 - b. Paul and Silas could neither move nor get comfortable.
 - (1) So, instead of sleeping, and instead of complaining about their present plight, they

decided that they would sing hymns and give praise to God.

(2) This took place at the midnight hour.

4. Now, we don't know what they prayed or sang, what we DO know, however, is that their prayers and their songs of praise were "unto God."

a. And we also know that all the other prisoners heard their prayers and songs of praise.

b. This midnight song is the first time we find recorded in Christian history where music helped believers make it through a bitter night.

(1) **Ephesians 5:19-20 – *Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.***

(2) **Ephesians 5:19-20 (MSG) – *Sing hymns instead of drinking songs! Sing songs from your heart to Christ. Sing praises over everything, any excuse for a song to God...***

(a) You need to learn how to encourage yourselves through prayer and praise!

(b) When you are feeling frustrated and bound by life's troubling situations, you need sing your shackles off!

(c) Make a melody unto the Lord and witness the feeling of deliverance coming over you!

5. Now, it is important to note that Paul and Silas were not offering up petitions, only praise!

a. They did not ask for early release.

(1) Rather, **they celebrated God's greatness** [because ***God is still great*** – He is still large and in charge – ***whether I am bound or free!***].

- (2) Paul and Silas did not moan about their miserable plight or complain about their current condition.
- (3) **Listen to Pastor:**
 - (a) Praise will accomplish at least as much, if not more than, petitions.
 - (b) In the words of Abraham Heschel:
 - 1) Praise precedes faith.**
 - 2) First we sing; then we believe!**

D. HANDCUFFED TO ENEMY SOLDEIRS

1. The fourth (and final) challenging position of faith that I want to share with you today is demonstrated by Peter sleeping between the soldiers (Acts 12).
 - a. And by it, I wish to show how we are sometimes handcuffed to people who do not share our destiny in this Christian walk, but if we keep our confidence in Christ, we are assured that we will emerge victorious.
2. Peter had been jailed by Herod, who had already killed James, the brother of John, and Peter's fellow-laborer.
 - a. Herod wanted to wait until after the festal period of the seven days of "Unleavened Bread" before he killed Peter.
 - b. So, Herod locked Peter in prison and placed around-the-clock guards – 16 men who each worked 6-hour shifts in groups of 4.
 - c. There Peter remained, shackled (or handcuffed) to two guards – one on either side.
 - d. The other two guards stood watching the gate – Herod was taking no chances!
3. Now, notice what verse 6 tells us (from The Message):
 - a. ***Then the time came for Herod to bring him out for the kill. That night, even though shackled to two soldiers, one on either side, Peter slept like a baby....***

- (1) It is amazing just how relaxed Peter remained!
 - (2) He was within hours – if not minutes – of death; and yet, he spent what was supposed to be his last moments on earth sleeping like a baby!
 - (a) He luxuriated in the providence and goodness of God and the prayers of the Church!
 - (b) He just went to sleep, and slept the sleep of confidence and trust in God – and perhaps would have continued sleeping had not an angel of the Lord come and disturbed him!
4. One has to wonder just how it was that Peter could have slept so soundly.
- a. Some say that it was because he realized that we are never truly alone in Christ, because, not only is Jesus with us, but also because as Christians we are always together in Christ.
 - b. Unceasing prayer was being made by the Church for Peter; and even though Peter was bound by chains and asleep between two soldiers, he was nevertheless awake in the realm of the spirit.
 - (1) Peter had a community of believers praying for him – a group of people who were “stretching forth” their hands unto God in prayer for him.
 - (2) It is no doubt that many of our spiritual battles are won (or possibly lost) on the praying fields of the Church.
 - (a) Perhaps Peter rested in the knowledge and awareness that the effectual fervent prayer of righteous people “availeth much”, (or, “has great power in its effects”).
5. There is no doubt that Peter could remain confident, knowing that while he lay in prison, there was a body of

believers who were interceding on his behalf – calling on the Name of the Lord and storming the gates of hell.

a. But I also maintain that one of the reasons Peter was so confident was because Jesus had promised him that he would, indeed, grow old (and he wasn't *old* yet).

(1) Jesus had told him, ***“When you were young you dressed yourself and went wherever you wished, but when you get old you’ll have to stretch out your hands while someone else dresses you and takes you where you don’t want to go.”***

(2) This was in reference to the kind of death that Peter would endure and bring glory to God, (John 21:18-19).

III. CLOSE

A. BRINGING IT HOME

1. I’ve got a word for someone in this house today!

a. Never doubt in the dark what God gave you in the light!

(1) If God has given you a promise, it doesn't matter how bleak and binding your situation gets, hold on to the personal Promise of God!

(2) Lay your head on your pillow at night with the knowledge that no matter how bad things look right now, God has more in store for you and this challenge will not destroy you!

2. I have shared with you Four Challenging Positions of Faith.

a. Four possible metaphorical positions you might find yourself at some point in your Christian walk.

(1) Perhaps one day you may find yourself kneeling in the mire, as Jeremiah had to do.

(2) Or, maybe you will be thrown into a fiery trial that is meant to destroy you, but will only make you more influential in the spirit realm.

- (3) You might possibly find yourself in a situation where you are bound spiritually like Paul and Silas were physically; and how you respond will determine the outcome.
 - (4) Or perhaps you will one day find yourself shackled to someone who seems determined to prevent you from obtaining your destiny in Christ.
 - (a) No matter what your challenging position of faith might be, take confidence that we serve a God that is able to bring you out, take you through, and shake things up so that, ultimately, you will come forth the victor!
 - 1) ***Job 23:10 – But he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold.***
 - 2) ***Or, as Proverbs 25:4 says, “there shall come forth a vessel for the finer.”***
3. The choice is yours.
- a. How will you deal with your challenge?
 - (1) How will you emerge from the trial of your faith?
 - (a) One thing I am certain of:
 - 1) If you have the proper response, God will show you the miraculous!
 - a) He’ll give you favor with kings.
 - b) He’ll walk with you in the flames and bring you out without even a hint of being burned.
 - c) He’ll shake your world; and

d) He will loose you from your chains!

B. ALTAR CALL

1. Won't you come?