The Catastrophe of Following Jesus

“Nothing is more certain. Coming close to God brings catastrophe. Everyone whose life does not bring relative catastrophe has never even once turned as a single individual to God; it is just as impossible as it is to touch the conductors of a generator without getting a shock.”

Soren Kierkegaard, Letters and Diaries

“For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.”

Apostle Paul, Second Letter to the Corinthians 1:8–9

Introduction

The Benefits of Following Jesus

- The catastrophe of not following Jesus
- The goodness of Jesus’ way
- The problem with ‘miserable sinner’ Christianity
- How do we enter more fully into the goodness of Jesus’ way?

The Catastrophe of Following Jesus

- We are not ready for the good life
- The problem with blessings/consolations
  (1) Blessings/consolations tend to make us think that we can make it on our own (self-sufficiency).
  (2) Blessings/consolations tend to make us think that we deserved them (self-righteousness).
  (3) Blessings/consolations tend to make us think that God exists for our sakes (self-centeredness).
- Enter catastrophe, stage right
  - “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die” (Bonhoeffer, Cost of Discipleship).
- The “intolerable compliment”

The Role of Weakness in Following Jesus

- What does catastrophe do?
- The paradigm passage: strength perfected in weakness
- Catastrophe as an Invitation to Embrace Personal Weakness
  (i) Personal weakness: all of the ways in which we are not God.
  (ii) Catastrophe/loss/pain is an indication, and thereby a reminder, of our personal weakness (i.e. that we are not God).
  (iii) Embracing our personal weakness through catastrophe/loss/pain opens us more deeply to the fullness of God in our lives (Eph 3:19).
    - “Nothing else right-sizes us like pain” (Keith Douds).
  (iv) Embracing our personal weakness is itself catastrophic.
  (v) Catastrophe/loss/pain becomes an invitation to embrace our personal weakness.
“Paul teaches that God’s way of exhibiting power is altogether different from man’s way. Man tries to overcome his weakness; God is satisfied to use weakness for his own special purposes. Too many Christians become disheartened over their infirmities, thinking that only if they were stronger in themselves they could accomplish more for God. But this point of view, despite its popularity, is altogether a fallacy. God’s means of working, rightly understood, is not by making us stronger, but my making us weaker and weaker until the divine power alone is clearly manifested” (David Alan Black, "Paulus Infirmus: The Pauline Concept of Weakness," Grace Theological Journal, 92).

- So is catastrophe good?

- Disciplines of Weakness
  1. Learn to savor weakness.
     - "sin is a means of grace" (Fredrick Buechner).
  2. Turn to God in the midst of weakness.
     - "seek the God of the consolations rather than the consolations of God" (Teresa of Avila)
     - Prayer #1: The prayer of the Canaanite woman: “Lord, help me” (Mt 15:25).
     - Prayer #2: The prayer of Job: “Teach me what I do not see” (Job 34:32).
  3. As the strength/empowerment comes, move with it.
     - God’s power moved with Moses’ right hand (Is. 63:12).

For further reading

- 2 Corinthians 10–12
  - The paradigm biblical passage for understanding weakness.
  - A theologian reflects on dealing with loss—highly recommended.
- David Benner, Surrender to Love and The Gift of Being Yourself (IVP).
  - Christian psychologist reflects on the need to embrace weakness in order to be fully alive to God—highly recommended.
  - Tozer’s classic can’t be beat on this issue—if you have already read it, read it again!
  - A scholarly (though readable) treatment of Paul’s theology of weakness.
- Sheldon Vanauken, A Severe Mercy (Harper & Row).
  - An existential journey of learning through pain (includes letters from C. S. Lewis).
- Michael J. Gorman, Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross (Eerdmans).
  - Particularly chapter eleven on weakness—scholarly level.
  - New Testament theologian looks at the “false self” as what needs to be crucified.