

TURNING OUR PROBLEMS INTO OPPORTUNITIES

Rev. Lawrence Baldrige

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Acts 6

¹ In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

² So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.

³ Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them

⁴ and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.

⁵ This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism.

⁶ They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

⁷ So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

Jesus once said to His disciples, “In the world you shall have tribulations; be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” Jesus was telling His disciples that they would have problems in life; that being His disciples would not immunize them against problems; that trouble would come to them as it would to other human beings; and that they would even have more problems in a sinful world because they were His disciples. Obviously every person has problems. Furthermore every church has problems. The presence of problems is a fundamental fact for all human beings and all institutions. The real problem, however, for us all, is how to handle the problems we face.

In the 6th chapter of Acts the early church is confronted with a very serious problem: the Grecian Jews are being discriminated against by the Hebraic Jews—i.e., being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. Over a period of several centuries the Jews had experienced the Diaspora, the Dispersion. They had been uprooted from their homeland—though some certainly had left voluntarily—and in a Greek-speaking world dominated now by the Romans, they spoke the Greek language and partook of the Greek culture. The Hebraic Jews, living in Palestine all their lives, though they perhaps knew a smattering of Greek and Roman, spoke Aramaic, a common form of Hebrew. Moreover, the Hebraic speaking Jews suspected the Grecian Jews of being less Jewish than they themselves were. This bias came from the Pharisees originally, the Hasidim, who sided with the Maccabees in their war against the Seleucids of Syria, who, like Alexander the Great, were trying to make Greeks out of them. Greek culture was called Hellenism, and they were trying to make Palestine Hellenistic in culture and in religion.

Now this issue of Hebrew Jewish discrimination against the Grecian Jews was a serious problem, for many widows had brought their husbands back to Palestine and Jerusalem for burial. When the Gospel was preached many Hebrew widows became

Christians, as did many of the Greek-speaking widows. (In Judaism the widows were cared for by the synagogue. This practice was carried on by the Christians. It was a simple form of welfare for those who had no status apart from their husbands.) They were in the same church, but they did not receive the same treatment. The Jewish-speaking widows got more attention than did the Grecian-speaking widows. The matter became so serious that something had to be done about it. The Apostles did the right thing—they turned a problem into an opportunity. The Apostle suggested and the Church appointed seven men to be servants, or deacons, to make sure that the administrative tasks of the church were done without discrimination. The problem became an opportunity to broaden the leadership duties of the church and to make ‘service to all’ paramount.

As disciples of Christ and disciples of the Early Church Leaders, we too need to learn how to change our problems into opportunities.

As we look at the Apostles the first thing we learn from them is that THEY SOUGHT THE WISDOM OF GOD in turning their problems into opportunities. ^{JAS 1:5} If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. ⁶ But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.” We know from the early chapters of Acts that the young church leaders went to God for their wisdom, and went in faith and found the wisdom of God. Most of their time in that 40-day interval between Jesus’ ascension and the Giving of the Spirit, the church was in the Upper Room praying and seeking the mind of God in what they should do. Prayer was their direct link to the greatest Source of wisdom in the universe, and they were unwilling to bypass that Source.

Whenever we have problems in our own lives or in our church lives, the first thing we should do is to seek God. Prayer in faith is the golden key that unlocks the treasury of heaven, and gives us the riches of wisdom and of knowledge. Prayer in faith is the most God-pleasing thing that we can do. When Jesus saw the faith of the Centurion, He was amazed at such faith. When Jesus saw the faith of the four men bringing their crippled friend to Jesus, we find these striking words, “Jesus seeing their faith said to the man, ‘Son, thy sins are forgiven thee.’ Again and again Jesus was pleased with faith. He was mirroring His Heavenly Father. The Bible tells us, ^{HEB 11:6} “Without faith it is impossible to please God, for he that cometh to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him.”

A Bible student will remember that in the Book of Judges, when the people went astray from God they had serious problems from their enemies. Realizing their plight they repented and prayed to God. What happened? God always sent a Deliverer. Someone helped them change their problem into an opportunity. The Living God wants to hear from His People. One can only speculate, but perhaps He allows us to have problems so that He can help us to turn them into opportunities for greater service. Remember also, “You have not because you ask not.” And remember, “Ask and it shall be given you; seek and you shall find; knock and it shall be opened unto you.”

The Apostle James reminds us: ^{JAS 5:13} “Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. ¹⁴ Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.”

The Heavenly Father promises that He will answer our prayers. When we have problems we first need to admit that we have problems; then we need to ask God to give us the wisdom to deal with these problems. In such a way we will be changing our problems into opportunities.

Not only do we need to seek the WISDOM OF GOD, we also need to do the WILL OF GOD. The Apostles knew that the treatment of the Jewish and the Grecian widows should be even-handed. They had been with Jesus for three years and had seen Him touch the leper, heal the blind, and treat all people as equally important. They had heard Him teach that God loved every human being so much that ‘He gave His only begotten Son.’ The Apostles themselves had been the victims of discrimination. They were the am-ha-arets, the people of the land, and the Pharisees and the religious establishment had written them off as ‘worthless.’ By the standards of the Pharisees and the Sadducees they were one step above the ‘Gentile dogs.’ Having been victims of discrimination themselves, they knew that all people are born equally under God, and that God their Maker was no ‘respector of persons.’

In his book, James makes that clear: ^{JAS 2:1} “My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don’t show favoritism. ² Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. ³ If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, “Here’s a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet,” ⁴ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?”

There are some things we do that we know that are not the will of God. Paul spoke about such things in the Book of Romans: ^{RO 1:18} “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, ¹⁹ since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. ²⁰ For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.”

As noted above, the Bible teaches that some things are so plainly against the will of God that each of us as human beings know that they are sinful and wrong—some things are so clearly and disgustingly wrong that we cannot deny them. But finding God’s will that will turn our problems into opportunities is not always easy. Still, I think

we can find God's will in three distinct ways:

The first way to find God's will in our problems is by looking at the Character and Person of Jesus Christ. Some consider it trite, but I think there is great wisdom in looking at my problems and asking the question, "What would Jesus do?" Those of us who are Christians are in the process of becoming like Jesus. In fact the word Christian means essentially 'little Christ's.' So, to be like Christ means to consciously have Him as our Ideal Person to Imitate. As we do so we will remember that in every decision He made, He sought and found the will of His heavenly Father. In the book of John, Jesus reminds us again and again that whatever He does, He does in the Father's will. Imitate Christ! Ask: "What would Jesus do?"

Since we are Christians we ought to know the second way of finding God's will in our problems that will change them into opportunities: We now have the Spirit of Jesus Christ within us. The Holy Spirit will tell us when we are doing the will of God by giving us 'peace' in our decisions. Further the Holy Spirit will tell us when we are not doing the will of God by convicting us of our wrong behavior. Such conviction disturbs our lives and brings us a good deal of uneasiness and unhappiness.

The Bible speaks also of 'spiritual discernment.' There are some problems that may have more than one 'decent' solution. In such cases we must seek the will of the Spirit. It is true, and most Christians know it first hand, the Spirit does tell us what is best and not just what is good or better. One simple example from my own life: Last night I decided to go to Hazard, so Martha and I got into our automobile and started toward the 'big' city. I only made it from my trailer to the top of the hill going into Mallie when I felt that I should not go to Hazard. So, I turned around and came back home. I know that sounds insignificant, but I felt like God did not want me to go to Hazard last night. I felt like I was discerning the will of the Spirit for us last night. Going to Hazard, Kentucky, might have been a good decision, but the best decision was to stay home. Nor, do we know what would have happened if we had disobeyed that spiritual discernment, and gone. We have the Holy Spirit within. He is our Advocate; he is also our Protector; He is also our Reminder. His basic purpose is to make us More Like Jesus, so that the world can see Jesus living in us.

Again, what we know about Jesus comes from the Bible. So the last and best way of knowing the Will of God is by reading the Bible in the Holy Spirit. The will of God is written in the Word of God and can only be understood in the Spirit of God. I hesitate to tell people that they can find the Will of God in the Bible. They cannot—unless the Holy Spirit helps them to find it there. The Author of the Bible must Himself help us to understand His Word and to find His Will in His Word. I remember well how I read the Bible before my salvation. I was like the Ethiopian Eunuch that Deacon Phillip met in the desert. My mind was closed to God's word. Isaiah 53 was just as puzzling to me as it was to the Ethiopian. I wondered: "How can I understand these words unless some man teach me?" Well, to be sure, men were helpful; we need men such as Phillip; but above all we need the Holy Spirit. After the Holy Spirit came into my heart, and after I asked God for wisdom, I understood the Bible in a new way.

God's word flowed like a river of love into my heart and mind.

When we see Problems as Opportunities, seeking God's Wisdom in solving them and taking advantage of them, and finding God's will through the Bible and the Holy Spirit in them, we will REJOICE AT WHAT GOD HAS WROUGHT. Albert Einstein once said, "In the midst of difficulties lie opportunities."

We sometimes think our problems are the things that make us weak as human beings. Not so! Our problems, seen as opportunities, make us strong. I found a statement recently:

Strength does not come from winning.
Your struggles develop your strength.
When you go through hardship
and decide not to surrender,
that is strength.

I obviously agree with that statement. It was true in Acts 6. Listen to the final statement regarding the solution of appointing seven Deacons to turn their problem into an opportunity for great service: ⁵ "And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch:

⁶Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them.

⁷And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith."

Through the Wisdom of God and the Will of God, the Church had turned a corner. All seven of these deacons were spiritually qualified. Moreover, all of them were Greek-speaking Jewish-Christians, and could more fully serve the Grecian widows than could the Apostles who were all Aramaic-speaking Jewish-Christians. Furthermore, Stephen became the first Christian martyr, and his prayer greatly influenced Paul's life to finally be changed in that mighty event on the Damascus Road. Further look what Phillip did in evangelizing the entire country of Samaria, and his role in the conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch, of whom, it is said, started the church in Ethiopia, and of his and his daughters' relationship and help to the Apostle Paul. Not much is said of the other Deacons, but God perhaps worked mightily in them also.

We all have our problems in life; but these are not just problems, but opportunities. We must take advantage of them and go with God to the top of the mountain. But, as someone said, 'when we get to the top of the mountain we need to climb higher.' You see, even success is a problem that we must turn into an opportunity. To be like Jesus is to grow beyond that which we are. Amen!