

OUR PERSPECTIVE ON A SITUATION CAN MAKE A HUGE DIFFERENCE WHEN IT COMES TO OUR INTERPRETATION OF WHAT IT MEANS. FOR EXAMPLE:

WHEN SEEING A HALF A GLASS OF WATER- IS THE GLASS HALF EMPTY OR HALF FULL? PERHAPS THE ANSWER IS GOVERNED BY HOW THIRSTY WE ARE.

OR HOW SHOULD WE INTERPRET A DECK OF PLAYING CARDS IN CHURCH- ARE THEY A WORLDLY DISTRACTION OR ANOTHER WAY OF GUIDING OUR WORSHIP?

LISTEN TO THIS STORY FROM THE MIDDLE OF THE LAST CENTURY, ABOUT A SOLDIER JUST OUT OF THE BATTLE ZONE WHO HAD TO ANSWER TO HIS COMMANDING OFFICER FOR LOOKING AT A DECK OF CARDS DURING A CHURCH SERVICE.

THE SOLDIER EXPLAINED THAT IN BATTLE HE HAD NEITHER A BIBLE NOR A PRAYER BOOK, BUT ONLY THIS DECK OF CARDS. THEN HE TOLD WHAT THAT CARDS MEANT TO HIM:

“YOU SEE SIR, WHEN I LOOK AT THE ACE, IT TELLS ME THAT THERE IS ONE GOD AND NO OTHER. WHEN I SEE THE TWO, IT REMINDS ME THAT THERE ARE TWO PARTS OF THE BIBLE, THE OLD AND THE NEW TESTAMENT.

THE THREE TELLS ME OF THE TRINITY, ONE GOD, FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT. THE FOUR REMINDS ME OF THE FOUR GOSPELS- MATTHEW, MARK, LUKE, AND JOHN.

WHEN I SEE THE FIVE IT TELLS ME OF THE FIVE UNWISE VIRGINS WHO WERE LOST AND THE FIVE WISE ONES WHO WERE SAVED.

THE SIX MAKES ME MINDFUL THAT GOD CREATED THE EARTH IN JUST SIX DAYS, AND GOD SAID THAT IT WAS GOOD. WHEN I SEE THE SEVEN IT REMINDS WE THAT GOD RESTED ON THE SEVENTH DAY.

AS I LOOK AT THE EIGHT IT REMINDS ME THAT GOD DESTROYED ALL HUMAN LIFE EXCEPT EIGHT PEOPLE, NOAH, HIS WIFE, THEIR SONS AND THEIR WIVES.

WHEN I SEE THE NINE, I THINK OF THE NINE LEPERS THAT JESUS HEALED WHO FAILED TO THANK HIM. WHILE TEN WERE HEALED ONLY ONE THANKED GOD.

THE TEN REMINDS ME OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS CARVED IN STONE BY THE HAND OF GOD. THE JACK MAKES ME REMEMBER THE PRINCE OF DARKNESS.

WHEN I LOOK AT THE QUEEN, I SEE THE CHURCH, THE BRIDE OF JESUS. AS I LOOK AT THE KING, IT REMINDS ME THAT JESUS IS LORD OF LORDS AND KING OF KINGS.

THERE ARE 365 SPOTS ON A DECK OF CARDS AND THAT IS THE NUMBER OF DAYS IN EACH YEAR.

THERE ARE 52 CARDS TO A DECK, THE NUMBER OF WEEKS IN A YEAR.

THERE ARE 12 PICTURE CARDS, THE NUMBER OF MONTHS IN A YEAR. THERE ARE 4 DIFFERENT SUITS, THE NUMBER OF SEASONS IN A YEAR.”

“AND SO”, THE YOUNG SOLDIER THEN SAID TO THE MAJOR, “YOU SEE, SIR, MY INTENTIONS WERE HONORABLE. MY DECK OF CARDS SERVES AS MY BIBLE, MY PRAYER BOOK, AND MY ALMANAC.

MOST IMPORTANTLY, MY DECK OF CARDS REMINDS ME THAT I NEED JESUS- 365 DAYS, 52 WEEKS, AND 12 MONTHS A YEAR, AND THAT I SHOULD ALWAYS PRAY FOR OTHERS.”

AS THIS STORY ILLUSTRATES OUR PERSPECTIVE INDEED CAN CHANGE OUR WHOLE OUTLOOK ON THE SITUATION.

THIS IS VERY TRUE WHEN IT COMES TO HOW WE ARE ABLE TO APPROACH SUFFERING, STRESS, FEAR, UNCERTAINTY, AND THE INEVITABLE CHANGES AND CHALLENGES OF LIFE.

BOTH OF TODAY’S SCRIPTURE READINGS SEEK TO TEACH THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSPECTIVE IN OUR RELATIONSHIP TO GOD AND LIFE’S CIRCUMSTANCES.

THE PROPHET JEREMIAH LAMENTED THE DESTRUCTION OF JERUSALEM AND THE EXILE OF HIMSELF AND GOD’S PEOPLE.

HE LAMENTED THE SIN OF THOSE WHO CAUSED GOD TO ENACT SUCH A PUNISHMENT AS WELL.

MANY PEOPLE MIGHT HAVE STOPPED RIGHT THERE WITH THE LAMENT.

THEY MAY HAVE GONE SILENT, FEELING EITHER SATISFACTION OVER GOD'S JUST PUNISHMENT OF SINNERS, OR ANGER THAT THE LORD PUNISHED THE INNOCENT ALONG WITH THE GUILTY.

JEREMIAH, WE REMEMBER, REMAINED FAITHFUL TO GOD AND YET HE ALSO WAS CARRIED AWAY INTO EXILE.

BUT THE PROPHET CHOSE NOT TO DWELL ONLY ON THE DESPAIR OF THE SITUATION, BUT RATHER TO FOCUS ON HIS KNOWLEDGE OF GOD.

INSTEAD OF SEEING THE LORD AS AN ANGRY JUDGE ISSUING PUNISHMENT, JEREMIAH REMEMBERS THAT GOD'S LOVE IS GREATER THAN HIS ANGER.

GOD'S MERCY FOR SINNERS OVERSHADOWS GOD'S PUNISHMENT OF SIN. IT IS HOPE AND NOT DESPAIR THAT WILL HAVE THE FINAL SAY.

HOW CAN THIS BE SO? BECAUSE FOR JEREMIAH THE "STEADFAST LOVE OF THE LORD NEVER CEASES, HIS MERCY NEVER COMES TO AN END, THEY ARE NEW EVERY MORNING. GREAT IS GOD'S FAITHFULNESS."

THE PROPHET ANSWERS THE SUFFERING AND DESPAIR; WITH A WORD THAT GOD WILL BRING HOPE AND RESTORATION- BECAUSE GOD'S LOVE WILL ALLOW GOD TO DO NOTHING LESS.

HE REMINDS HIMSELF AND HIS PEOPLE THAT GOD'S LOVE HAS REMAINED WITH THEM THROUGHOUT THE GENERATIONS, NO MATTER WHAT.

THERE, IN FACT, NEVER WAS A TIME GOD FAILED TO LOVE THEM, AND SO THEY CAN RELY ON HIS LOVE AND MERCY EVEN NOW.

SIMILARLY, PAUL ADVISES TIMOTHY IN HIS TWO LETTERS TO THE YOUNG PREACHER ABOUT THE TRUTH OF HIS CALLING AND GOD'S PRESENCE WITH HIM.

IN THE FIRST LETTER, TIMOTHY IS TOLD NOT TO BE INTIMIDATED BY HIS OWN YOUTH BUT REMEMBER HE IS EMPOWERED BY THE WISDOM OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

THE SECOND LETTER SEEKS TO FURTHER ENCOURAGE THE YOUNG MAN AND THE CHURCH IN EPHESUS AS THEY FACE THE FEAR AND CHALLENGES OF SUFFERING FOR BEING CHRISTIAN.

PAUL CAN BE COMPARED TO A FOOTBALL COACH ENCOURAGING THE QUARTERBACK AND THE REST OF THE TEAM DURING A TOUGH GAME.

SOME COACHES TRY TO SCARE OR BULLY THE PLAYERS INTO DOING BETTER.

BUT PAUL IS LIKE A COACH WHO SEEKS TO ENCOURAGE AND INSPIRE THE TEAM TO DO WHAT HE KNOWS THEY CAN DO.

HIS MESSAGE IS ONE OF COMFORT AND HOPE, WHICH ALSO REMINDS TIMOTHY TO RELY ON GOD'S MERCY AND LOVE.

PAUL COMBATS THE POWER OF FEAR BY REMINDING HIS READERS ABOUT THE MESSAGE OF THE GOSPEL.

IT IS NOT A MESSAGE OF DAMNATION, BUT SALVATION, IT IS A GOSPEL OF HOPE AND LOVE THAT CASTS OUT FEAR.

SPECIFICALLY, THE KIND OF PARALYZING FEAR THAT MIGHT LEAD SOME TO STRAY FROM FAITH OR PREVENT OTHERS FROM SHARING THE MESSAGE OF THE GOSPEL.

AND YET, WE NEED TO REMEMBER FEAR IS NOT ALWAYS BAD. FEAR THAT CAUSES US TO JUMP OUT OF THE WAY OF CAR IS GOOD. FEAR WHICH CAUSES US TO LIVE WITHIN A BUDGET OR TAKE CARE OF OUR HEALTH IS GOOD.

BUT FEAR OF THE DISAPPROVAL OF OTHERS THAT CAUSES US TO COMPROMISE OUR FAITH OR VALUES IS NOT GOOD. SUCH FEAR MAY EVEN CAUSE SOME TO TURN FROM GOD AT TIMES.

LIKEWISE FEAR THAT KEEPS US FROM ENJOYING THE LIFE GOD GAVE US, FEAR THAT PREVENTS US FROM HELPING OTHERS, IS ALSO NOT GOOD.

TIMOTHY IS ENCOURAGED TO COMBAT ALL TYPES OF FEAR BY REMEMBERING IN WHOM HE HAS PLACED HIS LIFE AND HIS TRUST.

HE FIRST IS INSTRUCTED TO NOT BE AFRAID TO SPEAK ABOUT PAUL'S IMPRISONMENT, OR CHRIST'S DEATH AND RESURRECTION, EVEN THOUGH SOME MAY MOCK HIM BECAUSE OF IT.

INSTEAD TIMOTHY- AND ALL CHRISTIANS FOR THAT MATTER, ARE ENCOURAGED TO HOLD ON TO THE GRACE OF GOD WHO SAVED US AND CALLS US TO BE HIS MINISTERS IN THE WORLD.

WE CAN HAVE CONFIDENCE THAT THROUGH OUR BAPTISM WE HAVE BEEN CLAIMED BY GOD AND SEALED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT.

AND IT IS THROUGH OUR AFFIRMATION OF FAITH, THAT WE RECEIVE THE SALVATION JESUS PROVIDES. WE ARE FURTHER EMPOWERED AND ORDAINED TO DO CHRIST'S WORK IN THE WORLD.

THEREFORE WE CAN APPROACH THE CHALLENGES OF LIFE AS A CHRISTIAN WITH GREAT CONFIDENCE.

THIS CONFIDENCE IS, NOT IN OURSELVES, BUT IN GOD'S LOVE AS REVEALED TO US THROUGH OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST. AND IT CAN OVERCOME ALL OF OUR FEARS.

OUR CONFIDENCE ARISES FROM THE KNOWLEDGE WE ARE CONNECTED TO THE POWER OF GOD IN JESUS NAME, THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT.

IT IS STRENGTHENED BY REMEMBERING THE PERFECT LOVE GOD HAS FOR US. THIS LOVE, AS WAS WRITTEN IN 1 JOHN CHAPTER 4, DRIVES OUT FEAR.

WE ARE REMINDED, AS PAUL SAID ELSE WHERE, GOD LOVES US JUST AS WE ARE, FOR WHILE WE WERE STILL SINNERS CHRIST DIED FOR US.

INDEED HE DID NOT DIE FOR RIGHTEOUS PEOPLE, BUT FOR THE UNRIGHTEOUS.

THE LATE ROMAN CATHOLIC SPIRITUAL WRITER HENRI NOUWEN SAW GOD CALLING TO EACH HUMAN BEING MUCH IN THE SAME WAY THE FATHER TOLD JESUS AT HIS BAPTISM – "YOU ARE MY BELOVED."

HE ENVISIONED GOD'S LOVE REACHING OUT TO EMBRACE US ALL, STRAINING TO BE HEARD OVER THE VOICES THAT PUT US DOWN, SAYING TO US- "I HAVE CALLED YOU BY NAME, YOU ARE MINE."

TRULY, GOD'S UNCONDITIONAL LOVE FOR US, AS TIMOTHY IS REMINDED, SHOULD INSPIRE US TO TRUST IN THE LORD AT ALL TIMES.

AND ALSO TO TRUST GOD'S ABILITY TO USE US- THROUGH THE BLESSINGS OF THE SPIRIT WE RECEIVE AS CHRIST'S DISCIPLES.

INDEED, IT IS THE GIFT OF THE SPIRIT OF GOD WITHIN US THAT GOES BEYOND OFFERING HELP TO US TO DO GOD'S WORK IN THE WORLD.

THE SPIRIT CAN ALSO STRENGTHEN US TO FACE OUR FEARS AND THE CHALLENGES OF LIFE FROM WHICH THEY OFTEN ARISE.

PAUL ENVISIONS OUR GIFTS PROVIDED BY THE SPIRIT, AS FLAMES OF A FIRE, ONE THAT AT TIMES MAY DIE DOWN TO MERE EMBERS, PERHAPS BECAUSE OF THE STRESS AND SUFFERINGS IN LIFE.

THUS HE CALLS UPON GOD'S SERVANTS TO FAN THE FLAMES, TO REKINDLE THE LIVING GIFT WITHIN SO IT ONCE MORE MAY PROVIDE US WITH THE WARMTH AND LIGHT WE NEED.

THIS SPIRITUAL POWER IS ONE THAT CAN ENABLE US TO OVERCOME OUR FEARS AND GIVE US SELF CONTROL THROUGH THE POWER AND LOVE OF GOD WITHIN US.

WE NEED THEREFORE TO STOP OFTEN AND PRAY, READ THE BIBLE, WORSHIP GOD, AND SEEK DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF GOD'S WORD FOR US TODAY.

WHEN WE FAIL TO DO SUCH THINGS WE CAN MORE EASILY BE OVERWHELMED BY LIFE'S CIRCUMSTANCES AND THUS FORGET THE RESOURCES GOD PROVIDES TO US.

MANY TIMES OUR LIVES GET SO CAUGHT UP IN SURVIVING, SO CAUGHT UP IN A CRISIS IN THE WORLD, OUR NATION, OUR COMMUNITY, CHURCH, OR PERSONAL LIFE THAT WE FORGET THE GIFT OF GOD WITHIN US.

THE CRISIS CAN BECOME SO ALL-CONSUMING, IT BECOMES THE FOCUS OF OUR ATTENTION.

CONSEQUENTLY WE MAY FORGET ALMOST EVERYTHING ELSE, INCLUDING POSSIBLE WAYS TO DEAL WITH THE CRISIS.

CHRISTIANS EVEN AT TIMES FORGET THEIR IDENTITY AS JESUS DISCIPLES.

THEY FORGET WHO HAS NAMED THEM AND CLAIMED THEM AND EMPOWERED THEM.

TODAY'S WRITING FROM PAUL IS THEREFORE NOT ONLY INSTRUCTIVE TO TIMOTHY OR THE EARLY CHURCH, NOR IS IT ONLY USEFUL FOR CHURCH LEADERS TODAY, BUT FOR ALL CHRISTIANS.

LIKE LAMENTATIONS, IT CALLS US TO A CERTAIN PERSPECTIVE, THE PERSPECTIVE OF GOD'S STEADFAST LOVE AND MERCY THROUGH THE AGES.

THIS IS A PERSPECTIVE OF VIEWING LIFE WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF CHRIST'S DEATH, RESURRECTION, AND PROMISED RETURN.

TODAY WE ARE CALLED ONCE MORE TO HAVE FAITH IN THE GOD WHO BECAME HUMAN FOR US, SUFFERED AND DIED FOR US, AND ROSE FROM THE GRAVE TO BRING US LIFE ANEW.

WE ARE ENCOURAGED TO RELY ON GOD'S GRACE AND REMEMBER GOD'S LOVE, AS WELL AS HIS POWER.

THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY COMMUNION IS A MEAL OF GRACE, A CELEBRATION OF THE SACRIFICE OF CHRIST AND HIS VICTORIOUS RESURRECTION.

LET US THEREFORE COME TO THE TABLE OF THE LORD AND SO SEEK HIS HELP TO REKINDLE THE GIFT OF GOD IN EACH OF US.