

Humbled by Circumstances

Deuteronomy 8; 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

This morning we conclude our sermon series on the topic of humility. We've seen that Jesus actually brought humility to earth when He became one of us. If we are like Jesus, we will have the same attitude in ourselves that we saw in Him. We will humble ourselves before God and we will clothe ourselves with humility before each other.

Today we are going to explore how God teaches us humility through difficult circumstances (or trials). We tend to dread the trials in our lives: conflicts with other people, physical limitations and sickness, lack of money or other resources, weaknesses, dealing with sinful habits, etc. We tend to think that our lives will be better if we have fewer trials and more comfort. This morning I want us to consider a different attitude toward such circumstances. If pride is our greatest enemy and humility our greatest friend (John Stott), then circumstances that lead to humility are also our friend.

Today we are going to take Deuteronomy 8 as a case study in being humbled by difficult circumstances. Sooner or later all of us will find ourselves in difficult circumstances; a trial-free life isn't an option in this world. The question is whether or not we will allow God to teach us humility through those circumstances

A Case Study in being Humbled by Circumstances: the children of Israel in the wilderness (Deuteronomy 8) The children of Israel are about to enter the Land, and Moses is giving them final instructions. One thing he does is interpret the last 40 years for them. He wants to make clear that God was humbling them so that they would be obedient. If they were obedient, then they would be secure. The most secure, safe place to be is in the center of God's will. Notice the connection in verse 1 between their obedience and their security in the Promised Land:

1 "All the commandments that I am commanding you today you shall be careful to do, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land which the LORD swore to give to your forefathers.

The commands of God always bring life. Given the specific promise God made to the children of Israel, their obedience to God would result in possessing the Land and living there securely. In verse 2 Moses tells the people that the past forty years in the wilderness God was refining them and preparing them for this life of obedience. This preparation involved teaching them humility. As we've seen the past three weeks, humility and obedience go hand in hand. Humble people are obedient; proud people don't really care about pleasing God.

2 "And you shall remember all the way which the LORD your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not.

As God led them through the wilderness, He was humbling them. In other words, God was bringing them to the place of seeing themselves rightly in relation to Himself. God was continually impressing upon them through their circumstances, "I am God and you aren't. I am

all-powerful, all-sovereign, and all-wise. And you are none of those things.” Through their circumstances God was testing them, exposing what was in their hearts (whether obedience or disobedience). Moses gives a specific example of this humbling and testing in verse 3:

3 "And He humbled you and let you be hungry. . . .

God intentionally humbled them by letting them “be hungry.” It was no mistake that they were in the wilderness with no provision for food. God wanted them to be hungry in order to humble them. Few things expose what’s in a person’s heart like hunger. It’s common to hear people say, “When I’m hungry I get grumpy/impatient/cranky. . .” Grumpiness doesn’t magically appear when we get hungry; it’s in our hearts waiting for expression.

Do you remember what hunger exposed in the hearts of the children of Israel? We read in Exodus 16:

2 And the whole congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. 3 And the sons of Israel said to them, "Would that we had died by the LORD's hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

Because they completely misinterpreted their circumstances, they actually wished that they were still in slavery in Egypt. They thought that Moses (and God really) had brought them into the wilderness to die of starvation. They mistakenly thought that God either wouldn’t or couldn’t provide for them. In reality, God was humbling them with hunger to expose their lack of faith and lack of love for Him.

We might expect that since they’d seen so many demonstrations of God’s power and God’s love for them that they’d be full of faith and full of love for God. They’d seen the ten plagues in Egypt; they’d walked through the Red Sea with water piled up on each side; they saw the Egyptian army consumed by the water behind them; and they’d experienced God’s presence as a cloud during the day and a pillar of fire in the night.

We might expect that people who had experienced God in such overwhelmingly powerful ways would never doubt again. But such experiences rarely sustain a person’s faith over the long haul. The children of Israel needed their lack of faith exposed. God did just that by letting them be hungry. But God, of course, didn’t stop there. He kept on teaching them:

3 "And He humbled you and let you be hungry, and *fed you with manna* which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD.

Manna was a white, flaky substance that blew into their camp every morning. It’s hard to say what exactly it was like (maybe dry oatmeal?). The word manna means “what is it?” – probably a reference to the fact that they really didn’t know what it was (“which you did not know, nor did

your fathers know). In their humbled condition, they were supposed to understand that “man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord.” They were supposed to conclude that ultimately bread wasn’t what kept them alive but God’s word; if He hadn’t spoken the manna into existence every morning, they wouldn’t have eaten. God was forcing them to realize that they were completely dependent upon His word for their life and well-being. Therefore everything that He said (that “proceeds out of His mouth”) was important. That’s really a stance of humility – a stance of absolute dependence upon God. (Isaiah 66:2 says that those who are humble “tremble at His word.”)

Verses 4 through 6 give us further interpretation of their circumstances in the wilderness.

4 "Your clothing did not wear out on you, nor did your foot swell these forty years. 5 "Thus you are to know in your heart that the LORD your God was disciplining you just as a man disciplines his son. 6 "Therefore, you shall keep the commandments of the LORD your God, to walk in His ways and to fear Him.

Moses is challenging the people to “know in their hearts” that God was disciplining them as a man disciplines his son. In other words, they needed to understand on a heart-level that God’s intentions toward them were *always* good.

The rest of the chapter is basically a warning to heed when they enter into the Promised Land. Moses warned them that when they experienced prosperity they would be tempted to become proud and self-sufficient (instead of humble and dependent on God). Let’s look down at verses 11 through 14:

11 "Beware lest you forget the LORD your God by not keeping His commandments and His ordinances and His statutes which I am commanding you today; 12 lest, when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived in them, 13 and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiplies, 14 then your heart becomes proud, and you forget the LORD your God who brought you out from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

Time tends to dilute the lessons we learn, even the powerful lessons that have the potential of being life-changing. Moses knew that there would be a day when the lessons of the wilderness were only a distant memory. The hunger pains would be long-gone and they’d have flocks and herds and crops to spare. Moses feared that their prosperity and comfort would cause them to “forget the Lord their God” who brought them out of slavery. Think about it: when He was providing manna one day at a time, it was hard to forget about God and His word (if He didn’t speak, they didn’t eat); but with stockpiles of bread and meat it was easy to forget that God’s word was still the most important commodity they had. [BTW, this is why fasting can be an important discipline for people who have pantries full of food: it simulates what the children of Israel experienced in the wilderness. David wrote in Psalm 35:13, “I humbled my soul with fasting.”]

In verses 16 and 17 Moses tells them that learning humility in the wilderness will help them avoid pride in the Land.

16 "In the wilderness He fed you manna which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do good for you in the end. 17 "Otherwise, you may say in your heart, 'My power and the strength of my hand made me this wealth.'

Charles Bridges, the 19th century pastor and theologian described pride as lifting up one's heart against God and "contending for supremacy" with Him (C.J. Mahaney, p. 31). Pride "contends with supremacy" with God by claiming power and roles that are God's alone. For example, revenge is an expression of pride because God says, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay" (Romans 12). Being judgmental toward others is prideful because God is the Judge (Romans 14:10). Pride contends for supremacy with God.

Moses warned the children of Israel against this same type of pride when he told them, "If you don't learn humility in the wilderness, you will get into the Land and say in your heart, 'It was my power and strength – and NOT GOD'S – that made me wealthy.'"

In the exact same way, God wants us to learn humility when we're in the wilderness – when we're in humbling circumstances – so that we will avoid pride during times of comfort. The biblical image of wilderness is that of hardship; but that doesn't mean the wilderness is a bad place. For example, Jesus intentionally spent 40 days in the wilderness, but He emerged strengthened and ready to face temptations. Since God wants us to learn humility in the wilderness we shouldn't dread the tough circumstances we face. Since humility is our greatest friend and since we learn humility in the wilderness, the wilderness is also our friend.

In our time remaining I want us to consider *Examples of Circumstances in which God can teach us humility*. These circumstances can be considered our "wilderness" – the place where we learn humility.

The first category I want us to consider are:

Circumstances that expose our sin, our lack of faith, our lack of consistency, etc. (Peter's denial of Jesus in Matthew 26) Remember how Peter was humbled at the arrest and trial of Jesus. Jesus had explicitly told Peter, ". . . before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times" (Matt. 26:34). Peter's response was, "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You." Peter was very confident about his devotion to Jesus and about his ability to follow Jesus. This is spiritual pride – the most toxic type of pride there is. If the "greatest" in the Kingdom is the person who humbles himself as a child, thinking you're spiritually superior to everybody else is a contradiction in terms. Because Jesus loved Peter and wanted to use Peter in great ways, He exposed Peter's spiritual pride.

The next thing we know, Peter, James, and John fell asleep three times while Jesus prayed agonizing prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane. And a short time later Peter denied Jesus three times. Listen to Peter's third denial of Jesus:

74 Then he began to curse and swear, "I do not know the man!" And immediately a cock crowed. 75 And Peter remembered the word which Jesus had said, "Before a cock crows, you will deny Me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.

Peter was brought face-to-face with his spiritual pride. He couldn't stay awake with Jesus, and he wouldn't even admit that he knew Jesus. "And he went out and wept bitterly." We know that Peter's remorse led to humility. His writings make clear that he had a radical change of heart.

In what ways have you been brought face-to-face with your own sin or your lack of faith or your lack of consistency? In other words, how have you seen your pride lately? In what ways have you "contended with God for supremacy"? I've talked with a couple of people recently who mentioned that they're seeing more clearly than ever before that they tend to judge other people (which is really God's job). Just like Peter, they've come face to face with their sin. The question is whether or not they are going to learn humility or not – letting God have supremacy when it comes to judging others.

As with the children of Israel in the wilderness, we need to interpret our circumstances correctly. God doesn't bring us face-to-face with our pride in order to condemn us, but to refine us and to teach us that we desperately need every word that He speaks. When it comes to being judgmental, one of the "words" that we desperately need is found in Matthew 7. There Jesus said that we need to take the log out of our own eye, then we'll see clearly to take the speck out of our brother's eye. God wants to make us humble so that we'll be the type of people who can provide legitimate help to others who are struggling with sin.

The second category involves:

Circumstances that expose our human limitations and weaknesses. (our bodies described as "jars of clay" in 2 Corinthians 4:7-18; Paul's "thorn in the flesh" in 2 Corinthians 12:1-10)

In 2 Corinthians 4 Paul made this statement:

7 But we have this treasure in earthen vessels (NIV "jars of clay"), that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves;

By God's design, we live in frail, brittle bodies so that nobody wrongly concludes that we have any power or greatness in ourselves. Paul writes that we have this treasure (the message of Jesus and Jesus Himself) in clay pots so that it will be obvious that God is the One who is powerful, not us.

Chris Maxwell was the preaching pastor of a church in Orlando. In 1996 he almost died after contracting viral encephalitis. The encephalitis caused deterioration of the nerves in his brain. Before he was good with names, good at spelling, good at conversation, good in memorizing Scripture. Now he has trouble with all those things. His children have to remind him of people's names when he's in public. His wife has to explain to people that they're leaving early because his mind is tired. He has to take naps every day (and people think he's being lazy).

His doctor told him, "Remember what Clint Eastwood says in the Dirty Harry movies, 'man's got to know his limitations.'" (quoted in *Leadership Journal*, Summer 2004) Maxwell says that the word "limitations" was previously a curse. A limitation was a disability, something to be overcome, something to conquer. But it turns out that his limitation/weakness is the very thing

that God has used more than anything else – both in his own life and in the lives of others. People all over the country seek him out – not because of his education or his gifting or his talents. They seek him out because of his weakness/limitation. He is a living parable of 2 Corinthians 12:9. Jesus said this to Paul:

9 And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

Making peace with your limitations/weaknesses is an expression of humility. In what ways have you come face-to-face with your own limitations? Maybe you've realized that:

- You can't do the things you used to do physically.
- You can control your children.
- You can't get past some addiction.
- You can't fix your marriage.
- You can't handle all the responsibilities you have (work, home, church, friendships, etc.)

When your limitations are exposed, it would be a huge mistake to think, "If I just try harder and seek God more, I won't have these limitations." There is a place for trying harder and for seeking God more. But the goal of the Christian life isn't to get so strong and competent and "together" that we no longer have limitations or weaknesses. That's not going to happen. Our limitations aren't a curse. They're an opportunity to learn humility. They are a God-given reminder that He is omni-everything and we are omni-nothing (as Larry Osborne likes to say).

Sooner or later you and I will come face-to-face with our own sin, weaknesses, inconsistencies, and limitations. That's a given in this world. The question is whether or not we'll submit to God and learn humility.