The Blessings of Hard Times

II Corinthians 1:3-5 (NKJV)

(Turn lapel mic on!!!)

As I look out over the congregation this morning, I see a number of you who are going through some pretty hard times right now.

*Some of you are caring for an aging parent.

*Some of you are dealing with some serious health issues that have you wondering what the future holds in store. Others of you are dealing with the serious health issues of one of your family members.

*Some of you are in the midst of a series of trials that have come one right after the other and you’re wondering what’s going to happen next.

*Some of you are still carrying a heavy burden of grief in your heart over the loss of a loved one.

For all of you who are going through “hard times” this morning, I have “good news” for you from the word of GOD. Please turn with me in your Bibles to II Corinthians the first chapter. And let’s read verses 3-5.

2 Corinthians 1:3-5 (NKJV)  Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ.

PRAYER
In his book, *In the Eye of the Storm*, author Max Lucado tells the humorous true story of *Chippie the Parakeet*. Lucado writes..........

**Chippie, the Parakeet** never saw it coming. One minute he was sitting peacefully in his cage, the next he was SUCKED IN........WASHED UP........and BLOWN OVER.

Chippie's troubles started when his owner decided to clean out his cage with a vacuum cleaner. She removed the attachment from the end of the sweeper hose and stuck it inside the cage. About that time the telephone rang and she turned to pick it up. She had barely said “hello” when she heard “ssssopp!” Chippie had GOTTEN SUCKED IN.

In a panic, she laid the phone down, turned off the vacuum and opened the bag. There was little Chippie alive, but obviously stunned. Since the little bird was covered with dust, she picked him up and raced to the bathroom and turned on the faucet, and held little Chippie under the running water. Realizing Chippie was soaked and shivering, she did what anyone with compassion would do, she reached for the hair blower and blasted LITTLE Chippie with hot air! Poor Chippie never knew what hit him.

A few days later, the local newspaper reporter who had written an article about Chippie's traumatic event, contacted the owner to see how the bird was doing. “Well” she replied, “Chippie doesn't sing much anymore, he just sits and stares all day long.”

It’s not hard to see why. SUCKED IN......WASHED UP........and BLOWN OVER. That’s enough to steal the song from the stoutest heart!


Has life's hardships “stolen your song?” Do you often find yourself sitting and staring into space wondering what lies in store for you in the days ahead?
Let's consider THREE TRUTHS that will help give us some perspective on “Hard Times.”

**TRUTH #1: Hard Times Are A Part of Every Life**

1. **PSALM 90:10** in the New International Version says........

   “Our days may come to seventy years, or eighty, if our strength endures; yet the best of them are but TROUBLE and SORROW, for they quickly pass, and we fly away.”

1. Think back to when you were a child and your mom or dad was trying to teach you how to ride a bicycle. If you were like me, my dad would steady the bicycle and run alongside me for a little ways all the while encouraging me to keep peddaling. And then he would let me go. And time after time after time I would crash my bicycle. My dad would come and help me back up on the bicycle and we would try again. And because my dad let me experience the pain of falling time after time, I eventually learned how to ride my bicycle.

2. Life itself is a lot like learning how to ride a bicycle. You do OK for awhile........then you fall down and get hurt.......then Your heavenly Father helps you up and you try again. And we go through this cycle over and over and over again all through life.
3. In our day and time, many “hyper-sensitive” “hyper-protective” parents believe the worst thing that could happen to their children is for them to experience failure or defeat or hurt of any kind that might damage their fragile self-esteem as though it will scar them for life.

Because of this “hyper-protectiveness” of parents many youth recreation leagues no longer keep score or have winners and losers in ball games so no child has to experience the disappointment of defeat. And at the end of the season they have to give out trophies to ALL CHILDREN who participated so no child has to feel he or she is not as athletically gifted as some of the other children.

Many PRE-SCHOOLS now have strict regulations regarding BIRTHDAY PARTIES that prohibits a child from only inviting his or her best friends to their birthday party, because no child should have to experience the emotional pain of being excluded.

Let me ask you something: If a child is shielded and protected from everything that might bruise their self-esteem, what do you think is going to happen to them as they get older and discover that in “the real world” there are winners and losers......and successes and failures......and rejection......and unfairness........and disappointments?

3. The Bible teaches us that from the very beginning HARD TIMES have been a natural part of living in this cursed and sinful world.

After the fall, God told Eve, “I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; in PAIN you will bring forth children.” And to Adam, God said, “Cursed is the ground for your sake, in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life.”

(Genesis 3:16 and 17 NKJV)
4. While it not make your current situation any easier to deal with, you can take comfort in knowing there are others who are going through the same hardships you are going through right now; perhaps to an even greater degree than what you are experiencing.

**HARD TIMES ARE A PART OF EVERY LIFE**

Now here is..............

**TRUTH #2: Hard Times Provide An Opportunity To Receive God's Comfort**

verses 3, 4a “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, Who comforts us in all our tribulation........”

1. Many people wonder why a loving GOD would allow us to go through hard times and suffering in this life. Why would a loving God allow people's lives to be devastated by disasters such as hurricanes or tornadoes or floods? Why would a loving God allow someone's body to be ravaged by cancer or why would He allow someone to live in pain every day?

    God does not CAUSE these things, but He does permit us to experience them so that we might know the blessing of His comfort and peace.
2. Do you know if GOD never allowed you and me to go through “hard times” and experience suffering in this life, chances are we would never seek Him or cry out to Him for help.

Man wants to believe he can be his own “savior;” that if he can earn enough money.......and get enough education.......and buy enough insurance.......and stash away enough savings that he can handle anything life dishes out. But the truth is WE NEED GOD.......WE DESPERATELY NEED GOD!

3. GOD'S greatest desire is to have a close relationship with us. He wants us to know Him and love Him and draw near to Him. And often the only way you and I can know the COMFORT OF GOD is to go through “hard times” and suffering.

Right now you may feel as though life has beat you up and knocked you down, but with GOD life can never knock you out! Because with GOD there is always COMFORT........and PEACE..........and STRENGTH no matter how bleak our situation may look to us at the moment.

4. How does GOD comfort us?

(A) He comforts us with His HOLY SPIRIT. If you have been with us these past couple of Wednesday evenings, we have been studying WHAT THE BIBLES SAYS ABOUT THE HOLY SPIRIT. And we learned that one of the ministries of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian is to COMFORT US. As our “Comforter” the Holy Spirit “comes along beside us” in our times of trouble and hardship. He is our constant companion. That is one way GOD comforts us.
He also comforts us with HIS HOLY SCRIPTURES. God's word is full of comfort and hope to help us when we go through “hard times” in this life. God has given us promise after promise in His word of what He will do for us in our times of trouble if we will just trust in Him. 

LISTEN TO JUST A FEW.................

PSALM 34:18-19 (NKJV) The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves such as have a contrite spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD delivers him out of them all.

PSALM 121:1,2 (NKJV) I lift up my eyes to the hills——from whence comes my help? My help comes from the LORD, Who made heaven and earth.

PROVERBS 24:16 (NKJV) For a righteous man may fall seven times and rise again.

ROMANS 8:28 (NKJV) And we know that all things work together for good to those who love GOD, to those who are called according to His purpose.

These are just a few of the many wonderful promises GOD has written in His word to COMFORT US when we are going through HARD TIMES.

HE COMFORTS US BY HIS HOLY SPIRIT.

HE COMFORTS US BY HIS HOLY SCRIPTURES.

And He comforts us through His HOLY SAINTS. Here in II Corinthians 1, VERSE 11, Paul thanks the Corinthian Christians for their prayers and acknowledges what a great source of comfort it had been to him to know that people were praying for him.

Doesn't it comfort you when a brother or sister-in-Christ comes up to you when you are going through a “hard time” and say, “I just want you to know you are in my prayers?”
By allowing you and me to experience HARD TIMES, THE GOD OF ALL COMFORT gives you and me the opportunity to receive the comfort of HIS HOLY SPIRIT... 

TRUTH #1: HARD TIMES ARE A PART OF EVERY LIFE
TRUTH #2: HARD TIMES PROVIDE AN OPPORTUNITY TO RECEIVE GOD’S COMFORT

Now here's.............

TRUTH #3: Hard Times Equip Us To Minister To Others

vs. 3, 4 Blessed be the God and Father of our LORD Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and GOD OF ALL COMFORT, who comforts us in all our tribulation, (now listen carefully) that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble with the comfort which we ourselves are comforted by GOD.

1. Do you know that the hardship GOD is allowing you to go through right now is equipping you to minister to someone else who goes through a similar hardship somewhere down the road? It may be weeks or months or even years before you get that opportunity, but you can be sure some day.......somewhere.......someone is going to need your comforting and encourging words to help them get through what you are going through right now.

2. That is how GOD works. No trial......no hardship......no trouble.......no sorrow is ever wasted by GOD. Until you and I have experienced hurt in a similar way as others we aren't fully prepared to sympathize with them or minister to them.
If you have ever lost a child you are more equipped to minister to someone else who loses a child than someone who has never gone through that painful experience.

If you have ever been through a divorce you are better equipped to minister to someone else who goes through a divorce than someone who has never been through it.

If you have ever had a loved one battle an addiction, you are better equipped to minister to someone else who has a loved one battling an addiction than someone who has never experienced that.

If you have ever suffered the loss of a mate, you are better equipped to minister to someone else who loses a mate, than someone who has never gone through that experience.

3. You see, as painful as it may be to go through “hard times,” GOD uses our hardships as a training ground to equip us to minister to others.
(Mona, I will be playing a recorded song for the conclusion. You will not need to come up to the piano until after the song has played. -Thanks)

"Blessings"

We pray for blessings, we pray for peace
Comfort for family, protection while we sleep
We pray for healing, for prosperity
We pray for Your mighty hand to ease our suffering
And all the while, You hear each spoken need
Yet love us way too much to give us lesser things.

'Cause what if your blessings come through rain drops
What if Your healing comes through tears
What if a thousand sleepless nights are what it takes to know You’re near
What if trials of this life are Your mercies in disguise.

We pray for wisdom, Your voice to hear
We cry in anger when we cannot feel You near
We doubt your goodness, we doubt your love
As if every promise from Your word is not enough
And all the while, You hear each desperate plea
And long that we’d have faith to believe

'Cause what if your blessings come through rain drops
What if Your healing comes through tears
What if a thousand sleepless nights are what it takes to know You’re near
What if trials of this life are Your mercies in disguise.

When friends betray us, when darkness seems to win
We know that pain reminds this heart that this is not, This is not, this is not our home
It’s not our home

'Cause what if your blessings come through rain drops, what if Your healing comes through tears, what if a thousand sleepless nights are what it takes to know You're near
What if my greatest disappointments or the aching of this life, Is the revealing of a greater thirst this world can't satisfy , what if trials of this life
The rain, the storms, the hardest nights are your mercies in disguise. (LAURA STORY)