

Stressed To The Breaking Point

On Sunday, we continued focusing on Jesus' last days, looking for clues as to how he managed the intense stress of those days so well. This week we looked at Jesus' experience on the cross.

1. Warm up question: Tell us about something stressful you experienced this week.
2. Read Luke 23:33-49. Before and during his crucifixion, Jesus was surrounded by vicious people who beat and mocked him. It ever anyone would have been justified in hating, it was Jesus. Yet his first words on the cross, as recorded by Luke, were: "Abba, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (vs. 34). From this we drew **Lesson 1: When facing great stress, waste no energy on hate; let it go; forgive.**
 - a. Read Hebrews 4:14-16. This passage tells us that Jesus experienced every temptation we face. What kinds of things do you think Jesus was tempted to say to those who beat and mocked him?
 - b. What do you think Jesus meant when he said, "They know not what they do?"
 - c. Notice that Jesus asked God to forgive his oppressors even though they had not asked for forgiveness. Do you think God forgave them in response to Jesus' request? If not, why do you think Jesus said this?
 - d. How do you think Jesus' words of forgiveness affected his experience on the cross? Do you think they made it better or worse?
3. Jeff shared a scene from a movie called "The Fathers." In the scene, a group of abuse victims gather at a local bar to celebrate after having a face-to-face confrontation with Cardinal Bernard Law. As they talk, one of them, Tommy, reveals that he actually once visited his abuser while he was dying in the hospital. As Tommy talks, the movie flashes back to the hospital. Tommy walks into the room and he sees the old man half-conscious, hooked up to tubes. Tommy says:

"Father, Father, its Tommy – Tommy Blanchette from Sudbury. I've come to visit you. You remember me, don't you, Father?" [The old man, unable to speak, gets an incredulous look on his face. Tommy moves close and sits down.] "I hated you. What you did to me and my brothers, and all those other boys at Sudbury – it was wrong. [Tommy begins to cry.] You shamed me, Father. How could you do that? [Pause] The real reason I've come, I want you to forgive me. [The old man's face contorts.] I want you to forgive me for the hatred I felt for you all this time. I believe the promise that Jesus Christ made to us is true. Would it be all right, Father, if we prayed together?" [He takes the old man's hand and prays.] "God, in the name of Jesus Christ, heal Father Birmingham. Forgive him his sins, so he too might have eternal life." [As the scene fades back to the bar, Tommy's friends are speechless.]

- a. Jeff said he thought this face-to-face encounter was very important for Tommy because it completely shifted the “power dynamic” for Tommy “from victim to victor.” What do you think Jeff meant, and do you agree with that analysis?
 - b. Have you ever been bitterly angry with someone? What happened to evoke such bitterness and anger? What toll, if any, did those negative feelings take on you?
 - c. Have you ever forgiven someone who hurt you deeply? What happened? How did you get to the place of forgiveness? Did it help you to forgive?
4. Matthew 27:46 says, “About three o’clock, Jesus cried with a loud voice, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” Yet not long thereafter, before breathing his last, Jesus says, “Abba, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Luke 23:46. So, in one breath Jesus expressed grave doubt, and in the next he entrusted his soul to God for safekeeping. From this we derive **Lesson 2: In times of great stress, allow yourself to give full voice to both your doubt and your faith.**
- a. Do you think God had actually forsaken Jesus? Even if not, do you think Jesus really felt forsaken?
 - b. Can you remember a time when something so terrible happened you doubted if God was there and felt Godforsaken? What happened? Did you allow yourself to express that doubt to God, yourself, and others? What kept you from losing faith?
 - c. In her book “Life and Death in Shanghai,” Nien Cheng tells how watching a spider spin a web in her prison cell lifted her faith in time of doubt. Do you think a spider web is a good reason to believe despite all life’s despair?
 - d. Jeff said, “Faith that is so weak it has to squelch doubt is not really faith at all.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
5. Before being nailed to the cross, Jesus refused to drink wine mixed with gall (a crude sedative/pain killer). Mt. 27:33. But after all the drama of the cross was completed, Jesus reversed himself and accepted wine. Jn. 19:28. Jesus probably initially refused the wine to keep his mind clear, recognizing that the suffering of the cross presented great risks and great opportunities, and that his conduct would be critical. From this we drew **Lesson 3: In times of great stress, how you conduct yourself matters.**
- a. Suppose Jesus had allowed his inhibitions to be reduced by wine and lashed out at his oppressors on the cross? Would that have ruined everything? Why or why not?
 - b. Times of great stress can break down our souls or build them up, depending on how we react. Jeff told how the stress of caring for his mother is refining his dad in beautiful ways. Tell us about a stressful time in your life that made you a better person. In what ways did you grow during that crisis?