

SACRIFICER OR SURVIVOR?

Life has many “ups” and “downs.” We would rather have the “up” experiences rather than those that can be described as “downers.” Sometimes we think of the “up” times as successes and the “down” times as failures. However, it is how we respond and react to the “ups and downs” of life that really determines our “success” or “failure.”

I have heard many people who have experienced setbacks in life (death of a loved one, a divorce, a loss of a job, etc.) describe themselves as “survivors” just taking it “one day at a time.” While there is merit in such recovery situations of making sure that the “down” experiences don’t cause us to be totally “down and out,” we must learn to move on and not get stuck in “survivor” mode as a way of life.

We don’t hear this terminology (being a survivor) used in the case of “up” times; however, we can let successes cause us to shift into “survivor” mode by letting pride or greed take control of the situations in which we find ourselves. The possibility is ever present in the “ups” and “downs” of living.

THE TEMPTATION TO SURVIVE RATHER THAN SACRIFICE:

In Matthew 14 we see that Jesus was near the pinnacle of His popularity. The crowds were such that He would try to avoid the crowds, but they would find Him. He taught them and, out of His compassion for them, He fed the crowd with the loaves and fishes. Needless to say, His popularity soared. The Scriptures tell us that Jesus was tempted in the same ways we are tempted. The people’s concept of the Messiah - a popular leader that could take care of their needs - was being dramatized before their very eyes. They were ready to accept Jesus as the Messiah but for the wrong reasons. At this point Jesus could have ridden the crest of a feel-good, hot-tub religiosity that most of those in the crowd would have followed and people would have hailed Him as the Messiah. Was this not why He came? Yes and No.

Yes: He did come as the Messiah.

No: He did not come as the popular leader that would take care of all their needs and usher in the rebirth of the national sovereignty that existed in the days of David and Solomon. Things could have been this way and the course of history would have been different if the Jews had been living in holiness since the time of the captivity and been prepared to anoint Jesus as the Messiah (See Daniel 9:24). However, the 70 weeks of Daniel had passed and they had failed to accomplish this (put an end to transgressions, etc.) and Christ came to die, a perfect atonement for sin.

There was a temptation to become a popular Messiah and be accepted by the people for the wrong reason. How did Jesus deal with such enticements? Matthew tells us in verse 23

And when he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into a mountain apart to pray: and when the evening was come, he was there alone

Jesus needed time alone to pray. Surely this is a need in the life of everyone of us. When we are tempted to take the “easy” way, we need time alone in prayer.

The alternatives were pretty well defined:

- A. Be accepted and enjoy the “good life” with the fame and popularity (to survive)
- B. Be rejected (even to the point of being put to death unjustly) by the very ones He came to save (to sacrifice). John tells us He came unto His own and His own received Him not.

The time alone in prayer helps us to hold on to “why we are on the earth.” Jesus did not come to be a survivor but to be a sacrificer.

IMPACT ON COMMITMENT:

Sometimes we think that since Jesus “paid it all” that we have no responsibility and there is no commitment to be made by us. That’s the temptation we face: “to be transported to heaven on flowery beds of ease.” The problem with such a choice is that it is not a valid choice. It will not take us to the desired destination. Others would have us to go further and to give our “best” to the Lord (implying we can do whatever we want to the rest of our lives). However, the Apostle Paul, wrote the following to the Christians at Rome.

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. Romans 12:1,2

We do not bring the “best of our lives” and present that to God. Our lives are to wholly holy and then we are to give our all to God. We are to live a life of sacrifice. We are to be sacrificers - not survivors.

IMPACT IN TIMES OF TROUBLE:

In Deuteronomy 28: 53-57 we see the descriptive prediction of an awful time in the life of the Children of Israel if they were to fail to follow the Lord. In this passage Moses foretells of a time in which the enemies of Israel would besiege the cities and people would resort to eating their own children and members of their families.

Unless our trust is firmly rooted in God, then in times of intense trouble we will be reduced to survival instincts that have no regard for anyone or anything but “self preservation.” Contrast this to the example of self sacrifice that Jesus demonstrated. Most people can be divided into “survivors” or “sacrificers.” The survivors take and consume resources while the sacrificers give and produce additional resources. Significant beneficial changes are made in the world by sacrificers.

IMPACT IN TIMES OF SUCCESS:

Matthew records a situation of anticipated success as Jesus neared the end of His earthly ministry. The disciples had heard about the Kingdom of God and they had their own ideas of what that would be. It was anticipated as being an “up” time. A time of great success. James and John (and their mother) were operating in “survivor” mode when they came to Jesus to request that special consideration be given to them in the kingdom – right and left sides of the throne.

The reaction of the other disciples is recorded in Matthew 20:24-28. One of the hallmarks of being in “survivor” mode is open, excessive ambition. Such an attitude and the resulting behavior will invariably induce indignation and envy in others. Since it is motivated by pride and selfish desires such behavior naturally evokes resistance from others. Humility is much more appealing than boastful behavior.

This is such an important lesson in life that Jesus immediately gave a teaching on the matter to His disciples. We can contrast the way of the world with the message of Jesus and see that the way of the world leads to animosity, adversarial relationship, and discord. The way of the Cross is the way of servanthood. It recognizes that the leader must multiple his efforts by those who are genuinely dedicated to him rather than those who operate from fear. The way of the world is to “survive” the way of the Kingdom of God is to “sacrifice.” The grain of wheat that stays on the shelf just rots, while the grain of wheat that is planted and dies produces much fruit.

IMPACT ON EFFECTIVENESS OF LEADERSHIP:

In the first six verses of Exodus 32, we see a failure of leadership on the part of Aaron, the brother of Moses. The people became restless because Moses had been on the mountain of the Lord for so long. They wanted a god they could see. So Aaron took their gold and made a calf as a representation of a deity.

What kind of leadership did Aaron offer? He found which way the crowd was headed and just went along with the crowd. That is NOT leadership. True leadership requires that a person take a stand, even if it is unpopular and say "no" to things that are obviously wrong. It is great if you can get people to do what is right and like it; however, the true test of leadership is getting people to do what is right and not whether you are liked or not. Aaron was afraid that the people would attack and maybe even kill him (he later told Moses that the people were set on mischief - verse 22). Aaron failed in his leadership test since he was seeking to save his life. A true leader must have the attitude of being a sacrificer and not just a survivor.

IMPACT ON OUR PLACE IN THE WORLD

Our place in the world can be understood only by understanding the place of the Church in the world. In the model prayer, Jesus said, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth as it is in Heaven." As the body of Christ, the Church is to do the work of Christ in the world today. As we review the things Jesus did, then we get a model of the sort of things we might be expected to accomplish in the church through individual believers who make up the church as we are led by the Holy Spirit. Our place in the world is found in our place in the church as it relates to the world. Therefore, we should know what God has called us to be and do in the church.

Jesus went about doing good and He revealed the truth of God in what He said and did. He demonstrated love in that He did not live His life as a survivor but as a sacrificer. We are to do no less.

A UNIVERSAL TRUTH?

While it may not be a "universal" truth, the following is nevertheless "true" in many cases:

- Those who are Survivors take from the world and diminish its worth.
- Those who are Sacrificers give to the world and make it a better place.
- The greatest contributions to the world are made by the greatest sacrificers.
- The all time greatest benefit to mankind (reconciliation with God) was accomplished by the greatest sacrifice ever made (the death of Christ on the Cross).