

“Even If” – part 2

Last week I began a series entitled, “**Even If... I will...**” in which I stated that we often have very little control over the “**even ifs**” in our lives but we always have control over our response to them.

And we looked at several different examples of how people responded to their “**even if...**” moments of life.

- **Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego** couldn’t control King Nebuchadnezzar’s edict that everyone had to bow down and worship the very large image of himself. But they could choose on how they responded to it and they chose to disobey the king and honor God by refusing to bow down and worship him – even though it could have cost them their lives.
- **Daniel** had no control over King Darius’ edict that required people to only pray to him for the next 30 days. But Daniel could control how he responded and he chose to continue to pray to God 3 times a day with the shades in the upright position – even though it could cost him a night in the hungry lions den and most likely the end of his life.
- **Abraham** couldn’t control God initially asking him to pull up his tent stakes and move his family to an unspecified location and he couldn’t control God asking him to sacrifice his one and only son Isaac. But he had the choice on how he would respond and each time he didn’t hesitate but immediately sprung into action in obeying God.

The list could go on and on with hundreds of cases where life’s circumstances were not necessarily ideal for enjoying life’s pleasures and comforts. And the challenge is how do we respond to the storms of life and hence the question, “**Even if...I will....**”. Even if God allows various storms into my life how will I respond to them? And what I encouraged each of you to do last week was to fill in the ...behind the “Even if...” and maybe choose this to be a time of self-reflection and examination. How have you responded to life’s storms in the past?

- **The Apostle Peter** was all over the board with his reactions to the storms of life.
 - When they came to arrest Jesus he bravely defended him by pulling a dagger out and cutting off Malchus’ ear.
 - But a few hours later he became a coward and denied Jesus 3 times in order to save his own life.
 - 50 days later, on the Day of Pentecost, Peter boldly stood up and preached a powerful sermon that God used to convict people of their hand in killing Jesus and 3,000 people accepted Jesus and were baptized that day.
 - And church history tells us that Peter’s life came to an end through crucifixion but Peter requested to be crucified in the upside down position out of respect for Jesus.
- **The Apostle Paul** certainly had plenty of his own “**Even if**” incidents. He itemizes many of these storms in **2 Corinthians 11** and I’ve listed them on the screen for your recollection. In the very next chapter Paul lists another “**even if...**” event and here he records his response to it. Some of you have experienced your own version of Paul’s “**thorn in the flesh**” and like Paul you’ve asked God to take it away. But perhaps God’s response to you has been the same as His response to Paul. “**No, my grace is sufficient for you.**” It’s quite likely that like Paul you weren’t happy with God’s response of “NO” and you kept asking God to remove that thorn or storm. But I would suggest that we can learn a great deal from listening to Paul’s response here to God’s “NO”, “

2 Corinthians 12:9-10 (NIV) *Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

Paul’s response to his storms in life was to set his sights on God’s goodness and rely on His strength and to praise Him. The result of that response is that it allows people to have their focus directed to God and

not to you – and that’s way better for them. Now, as I mentioned last week – I doubt many of us would use the word “*delight*” to describe our reactions to the storms in life. **I think the only way possible that this can be our attitude is when the display of God’s goodness and greatness in and through our lives is more important to us than our physical comfort.** But if your physical or mental or emotional comfort ranks higher in importance than the display of God’s glory then you will never be able to delight in the storms of life. Let me say that again – when the display of God’s glory ranks lower in priority than your physical comfort than you’ll live on roller coaster of emotions based on the storms of life that God allows to happen in your life.

Also, God can do far greater things in and through the storms in our lives than through the easy and comfortable times. Because it’s in the midst of those storms that we have to learn to depend upon God to a far greater degree than when we’re in charge and capable. It’s when we realize that we can’t do it that we can finally get out of God’s way and let Him do what He does best – and that is to display His sufficiency and character.

Paul wrote about what this looks like in **2 Corinthians 4** when he mentions twice that in the midst of the challenges and “*Even if’s...*” of life he doesn’t lose heart. He certainly would have plenty of chances and reasons to lose heart. But he states at the beginning of 2 Corinthians chapter 4 and at the end that we didn’t lose heart. And why doesn’t he lose heart, why didn’t Paul get discouraged? Paul didn’t lose heart because of this perspective that he had on his life and the storms of life. He says, “*Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*” (2 Corinthians 4:16-18 (NIV))

As I said last week, the key for Paul’s victorious life is where he focuses his mind, heart and his eyes. He says instead of looking at or staring at and being consumed by his problems – Paul focuses his eyes and mind and heart on what is unseen. Last week I narrowed that down to focusing on Jesus. Which is a wonderful, delightful source of our focus. But there’s much more here than merely focusing on Jesus.

Notice, Paul says that *these light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So, we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.* (2 Corinthians 4:17-18)

He says that when the storms of life come – he’s trained his eyes and mind to instead of focusing on this deteriorating life to instead focus on the rest of eternity. To focus on what it will be like to live every day in the presence of God. To close your eyes and imagine what it will be like to live forever and ever in a place free of pain and suffering and sin. To never experience disappointment or betrayal or addiction.

Chapter 5 is a continuation of Paul’s explanation of how he doesn’t lose heart but remains strong and focused when the “Even if’s...” of life come knocking on your door.

Please follow along as I read **2 Corinthians 5:1-5**

Consider for a moment the implications of your body being a tent. There are all sorts of various types of tents. They’ve certainly have improved over the years.

- Here’s a picture of the type of tent Paul would have been familiar with. Not much protection from the wind and the rain.
- Here’s the type of tent I remember growing up with as a child – an army style tent with the center pole standing in the middle and lots of ropes around the sides that I tripped over on more than one occasion in the middle of the night.
- Today the tents have become much more light-weight and portable and much easier to set up. In fact I’ve seen one advertised online that you merely shake out and it sets itself up ready to use.

Let’s see a show of hands of how many of you have ever stayed in a tent.

I’ve tented quite a bit during my life and have some great memories from those experiences.

- I remember the time our family tented in Canada and woke up in the morning with the sight of slugs all over the outside of our tent – pretty disgusting.
- I remember tenting on a west coast trip when we set up in the dark under a really large tree, thinking it's branches would protect us from the rain, only to discover when we woke in the morning that we were camped in a pretty low spot and hence our tent was sitting in a moat of water.
- I remember camping with a friend of ours, Dave Sanford, years ago and we were trying out a tent we'd recently purchased at a garage sale. It looked very nice and it was really big and roomy. Well during the middle of the night it started raining really hard. And at one point we heard Dave rustling around on his side of the tent and then started chuckling. We turned on a flashlight and saw Dave holding an umbrella over his head to try to keep the steady stream of water off of his face. He was pretty much floating in a pool of rainwater on his lower side of the tent.

For those of you who have ever slept in a tent are very familiar with the backaches when you wake up in the morning, and that's assuming you ever found a position comfortable enough that allowed you to fall asleep.

All that being said, tenting can be enjoyable when you're younger and provides great memories and stories but very few people desire to live long-term in a tent. And as individuals get older they tend to upgrade into slightly better accommodations such as 5th wheelers, motorhomes or hotels. But even with those most people still see those solutions as temporary and look forward to getting home and sleeping in their comfortable bed.

And that's the point Paul is making here in reference to these bodies we now live in.

1. Our bodies are intended to be temporary like a tent.

Especially if you were living in a tent similar to what Paul would have made, as a tentmaker, and slept in many times in his life. That form of tent didn't provide much protection from the wind and rain and no air mattresses for added comfort. And so Paul was really looking forward to the upgrade when he moves to heaven and receives a brand new indestructible body. Some of you would like to upgrade right now if that were possible. You'd love to be done with the aches and pains and limitations this body provides. And God is offering us, in the future, precisely that upgrade.

2. We groan while living in our temporary tents (5:2)

We're currently in the beginning of gardening season and one of the irrefutable facts about the beginning of gardening season is that I groan a lot. A couple of weeks ago I'd been out working in my gardens most of the day, raking and shoveling and bending over a lot and that night my body ached all over while I was lying in bed. All night I kept tossing and turning trying to find a comfortable position in which to sleep but without any success. Finally morning arrived and I went downstairs to work out and while stretching on my exercise ball I couldn't believe how much I was groaning. A little later I came upstairs and said to Connie, "Man I sure groan a lot." And she heartily and quickly agreed, which convinced me that this whole groaning thing might be not that rare of an occurrence and upon additional questioning discovered that it isn't. My guess is I'm not the only one in this room this morning that groans from time to time. And groaning isn't just caused by physical pain. Often the source of our groaning is from emotional pain as well.

In another of Paul's letters he states that we're not the only ones who groan. (Romans 8:22-23) All of creation is also groaning in anticipation of a new world order where there will be no more need to groan, because we won't hurt physically or emotionally. Who looks forward to no more groaning – either from you or others?

Emotional groaning occurs because the pain cuts so deep that words can't adequately express the pain you're feeling. And in the next couple of verses Paul says that God has done an amazing thing to help us in our groanings. He gives His indwelling presence in the person of the Holy Spirit and the Spirit joins

with us in the midst of our groanings and expresses His deepest feelings to our Heavenly Father. (Romans 8:26). I can't explain exactly how this happens – but what it reminds me is that God cares about my pain and enters into it with me and walks with me through it helping me to cry out to Him in my darkest most painful moments. And we don't have to worry about putting our thoughts and emotions into the exact right phrases or words. Sometimes all we can do is sit before God and sob. And in those moments you need to know that God is right there with you sobbing and groaning as well and expressing your breaking heart to God and in the process He begins to slowly heal you.

Back in our passage in **2 Corinthians 5:5**, Paul reminds us that for right now the indwelling Holy Spirit has been given to us as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. A deposit has to be a portion of what is still to come. If I put down a deposit on a house the bank expects the deposit to be real money – a portion of the rest to be paid in real money payments over the next 30 years. Likewise, the Holy Spirit is a reminder that one day we will be living in the very presence of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit – the Trinity. That's one of the things I really enjoyed about the book and the movie, The Shack. The portrayal of the interaction between the three of them. It was such a delightful portrayal of the interaction between the three of them. I can't wait to see and experience that in person.

And I tend to believe that once we've spent the first couple of hundred years no longer in physical or emotional pain and fully experiencing the extraordinary beauty of God's creation as it was intended to be – the storm clouds of this life, the "Even if's..." of this life will fade away and become just a distant memory like a momentary blimp, like a blink of an eye in the span of all of eternity.

It's this life spent for all of eternity with God that Paul focuses his mind and attention on and it's what keeps Paul from losing heart in the midst of the many "**Even if's...**" in this present life.

One day God will pull the ropes on this current tent you're living in and welcome you into your permanent home in heaven. That will be the easiest and by far the best move you'll ever make. No need to pack endless boxes with all of your current possessions, no need to rent a moving truck or line up helpers. God's in charge of this final move. There won't be any hand me down furniture up in heaven. Although for some of us I do wonder if God will humor us by still offering garage sales where everything is free. If that's true than those garage sales will be the best you've ever seen. And Tag Tuesdays at Goodwill will happen every single day. That's my version of heaven.

Yesterday I spent about an hour pulling dandelions out of my yard and I often chuckle thinking that wouldn't it be something if when we arrive in heaven that we discover dandelions filling every yard and field because God was so proud of his formation and creation of the dandelion with it's tall green stems and pretty yellow top. And all of these years we've spent hours and hours and lots of money on chemicals trying to kill them. I would imagine you have your own dreams about what heaven may be like. It's good to dream about such things. I wonder if one of the reasons that God didn't go into a lot of detail in the Bible describing what heaven will be like is because He wants us to dream about it. And I'm confident that once we arrive it will blow our wildest dreams right out of the water.

Paul ends this fabulous section with these thoughts.

Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. 7 For we live by faith, not by sight. 8 We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. 9 So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. 10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

(2 Corinthians 5:6-10 (NIV))

Of course as Christians we are no longer under God's judgment because of God's love and grace and will only receive a warm welcome home from God and the eyes to our new home and I anticipate a hug from Jesus (I picture him as a hugger). And so Paul says, we live this life primarily by faith and not by sight. Fully trusting that what God has promised He will deliver on. And so Paul says our overriding goal in everything we do and say while living in this temporary tent with a temporary body of clay is to live it to

please God in everything we do and say. That's how you get through the "*Even ifs...*" of life. By focusing your eyes, mind and heart upon God and His rewards He's waiting to give us rather than on your problems. This practice won't make your problems go away but it gives you a perspective that gives a sense of purpose to the storms clouds of this life. Because this life is not all there is to our existence. This life is but a blink on the span of eternity with the vast majority of eternity will be spent in God's presence and enjoying His daily and loving blessings. And also realizing that the storms in this life can be used by God to prepare our minds and hearts for where we will spend all of eternity.