

The Decision to Accept What You Do Not Choose

1. Warm up: On Sunday Jeff told us how his dog Ore-oh! startled him when he was walking her past a pond and she suddenly bolted after some ducks, broke loose, took a flying leap, and belly flopped into the pond. Life is full of little surprises! As you look back over the past few weeks, what's something that's happened to you that you would categorize as one of life's "little surprises."
2. Life often thrusts us into circumstances that are not of our own choosing. Sometimes it's little things that we laugh off, but other times it can be something huge and traumatic. So on Sunday, as we continued our study of Bishop Mariaan Edgar Budde's book, *How We Learn to Be Brave: Decisive Moments in Life and Faith*, we focused on her fourth chapter – The Decision to Accept What We Do Not Choose. Jeff shared the story of Jen Hatmaker, a hugely popular Evangelical Christian author and speaker – one of the leading female voices in the evangelical movement. Many of her books became New York Times Best Sellers. But then, six years ago, her world suddenly fell apart. She discovered that her husband, himself a pastor, was cheating on her. The fallout from that eventually led to divorce. Jen's divorce, coupled with her evolution to more progressive views of race, LGBTQ+ people, and other social issues, caused the bottom to fall out of her ministry. She lost everything.
 - a. At one time or another, in one way or another, no matter how charmed our lives are, every one of us is going to find ourselves in a place like Jen Hatmaker. Unlike her, our disaster may not be losing our marriage or career or our spiritual tribe. But there are plenty of other tragedies to go around. Life will often take us where we do not wish to go. Looking back over your own life, what would you say is your most devastating experience of life taking you where you didn't want to go? What happened? How did that experience affect you?
 - b. In John 21:18, Jesus gave these words of warning to Simon Peter, "Very truly I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and **take you where you do not wish to go.**" Life's good when it feels like we're "in control." But how do you tend to react when you personally encounter a patch of life where it feels like you're not in control?
 - c. Jeff said, "Suffering is so much a part of life, you and I will never be able to live well until we learn to suffer well." What do you think he meant? Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. So, what does it look like to suffer well? Bishop Budde suggests a two-part answer. The first part of her answer is: **Acceptance – Embrace what you cannot change, so the energy invested in resisting can be redirected to something positive. Stop raging against what you cannot control.** To illustrate this first point, Bishop Budde points us to the example of the Apostle Paul and his "thorn in the flesh." So let's read II Corinthians 12:7-10, as printed on p. 3.

- a. Based on other clues in the New Testament, Paul's "thorn in the flesh" was probably a severe visual impairment. Paul asked God to heal him, but God didn't. So here's somebody who had worked miracles for others, but couldn't get one for himself. How do you think Paul felt when his prayers weren't answered? How do you feel when you ask God for something, but don't get the response you hoped?
 - b. God told Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in your weakness." II Corinthians 12:9. What do you think that means?
 - c. Paul responded to the foregoing message from God by saying, "Therefore, I am content with weakness . . . , for whenever I am weak, then I am strong." In other words, he accepted and embraced his physical disability. When Paul finally reached this place of acceptance, how do you think he felt? How do you think it affected him?
 - d. Reinhold Niebuhr's famous prayer says, "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Jeff said, "Acceptance is one of life's most important foundational spiritual principles." When in your life have you made peace with something you wanted to change, but couldn't? When you finally accepted what you couldn't change, how did that feel? How did the decision to accept affect you?
4. It's one thing to *say* we should accept the bad things in life we can't control, but quite another to know *how* to do that. How are we supposed to make peace with something that's really painful? That brings us to Bishop Budde's other key point. The answer to how to make peace with something painful is: **Redemptive Suffering – You have to find a redeeming purpose in your pain.**
- a. Simone Weil says, "The extreme greatness of Christianity lies in the fact that it does not seek a supernatural remedy for suffering, but rather a supernatural use for it." How do you feel about this statement? Do you agree? Why or why not?
 - b. Jesus is the ultimate example of Redemptive Suffering. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus could have called down 10,000 angels to rescue him. Instead he accepted the suffering that lay before him because he believed his suffering would serve a cosmic purpose. I Peter 2:24 says, "Jesus himself bore our sins in his body on a tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed." Hebrews 12:2 says, "Jesus . . . for the sake of the joy set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God." Based on these verses what would you say was the purpose for Jesus' suffering? And what do you think it means that "for the sake of the joy set before him, he endured the cross." What was it that gave him such joy?

- c. Tell us about a time in your life when you've personally experienced Redemptive Suffering. In other words, tell us about a time when you or someone you know suffered greatly, but something good resulted from that suffering either for you or someone else.
- d. Is there a place in your life right now where you're experiencing suffering and struggle? Do you believe that something good could come from that suffering? Can you see (or imagine) what that good might be? Have you accepted and embraced that experience of suffering in your life?

II Corinthians 12:7-10

Even considering the exceptional character of the revelations I have received, to keep me from being too proud, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to trouble me, to keep me from being too proud.

⁸Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, ⁹but God said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'

So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. ¹⁰Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.