

IN THE MARGINS: When things go terribly wrong

By Tony Martin

Editor

Pretty uplifting title for an article, eh?

I've always known that it was possible to have good days and bad days. In my sage maturity, though, I've come to realize you can have good weeks and bad weeks, good months and bad months, and even good years and bad years. COVID taught us a lot about those bad years. What a mess.

I recently had an extended online conversation with a friend who has given me permission to share a little of his story, provided I keep him anonymous. I'll call him Don.

Don spent several years in youth ministry (and yeah, I know the proper term is student ministry, but humor me.)

He made a significant impact on a lot of teenagers and their families. In the last couple of years, however, things took a bad turn.

By his own admission, he made some bad choices. Specifically, it had to do with how he handled his finances. He found himself in deep debt. His marriage was under significant strain, to the point that he and his wife separated. (Spoiler: They've since worked things out.)

This "wolf at the door," as he named it, impacted every area of his life and ministry. Money issues can be huge and as negatively impactful as anything else in life.

His nutshell statement to me was, "I blew it. I blew it even when I knew better. It's cost me a lot. I feel that God has punished me for my lack of stewardship. And even though things

are better, I still mess up.”

Don learned about sowing and reaping, and how the grief we face is often of our own doing. What about the times when we’ve done all the right things and life still unravels?

Let’s be real: life doesn’t always stick to the plan. Sometimes, out of nowhere, we’re hit with something tough – maybe the loss of someone we love, a personal setback, or a really hard blow that knocks the wind out of us. While these moments are tough, they’re not without purpose. They play a big role in our spiritual lives, and a lot of that has to do with how God sees things.

Why Life’s Challenges Matter

It’s not that God doesn’t care about what we go through. Instead, He allows these challenges because they are part of a bigger plan, helping us grow in ways we might not even realize. Romans 8:28 nudges us with this reminder: *“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”* This doesn’t mean everything that happens is good, but it does mean everything can work out for good.

What Happens During Tough Times?

How we come out of these tough times – better or bitter – really depends on how we handle them:

- **Choosing Our Path:** We can let challenges make us tough and critical, or we can grow from them, becoming more understanding and kind-hearted. It’s really up to us.
- **It’s All About Our Bond with God:** The closer we are to God, the more these tough times can turn into deep spiritual milestones, making us stronger in our faith and as individuals.

Transforming Through Trials

Our reactions to life's rough patches can go in a couple of different directions:

- **Growing in Grace:** For those of us who keep God close, challenges can make our faith even stronger. They teach us to lean not on our own strength but on God's. James 1:2-4 puts it like this: *"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."*
- **The Danger of Cynicism:** If we're not solid in our faith, the same challenges might just make us cynical and quick to criticize, pushing us away from trusting God's wisdom.

Strengthening Our Connection with God

So, how do we make sure we come out of these trials better than before? Here are a few tips:

- **Stay Spiritually Active:** Keep up with prayer, reading the Bible, and hanging out with fellow believers. These habits keep our spiritual batteries charged.
- **Get Advice from Those Who've Been There:** When things get tough, it's helpful to talk to people who've faced similar challenges and kept their faith strong. Their advice can be gold.
- **Lean on Your Community:** Don't underestimate the power of your church or small group. As Galatians 6:2 tells us, *"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ."* We're stronger together.

Reflections on Being Close to God

In the end, how deep we are with God really plays a huge role in how we handle life's storms. A shallow faith might wobble when things get real, but a deep, strong faith can take a lot and keep standing. It's like having roots that cling to the rock – no storm can pull us up.

Wrapping It Up

When life throws those curveballs, it's not about asking why they happened, but about how we can use these experiences to get closer to God and beef up our faith. Will we get bitter, or will we get better? A lot depends on the little choices we make every day about where we put our trust and how we connect with God.

Remember, it's not the storms themselves but which way we face during them – towards God or away – that really shapes who we become.