

2CH Sunday at 7.30

When things fall apart

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What do we do then things seem to fall apart? When we are at our wits end? How can we hang on and not give up when life seems to be crumbling around us. We have seen enough evidence in recent times of how the world in which we live is not such a safe place, not such a secure place as we once thought. But in our personal lives, the towers can come crumbling down, the foundations can be shaken, and a more subtle form of terrorism can endanger our well being. We can become the victims of the failings of others, the tendency of all human beings to look after themselves first and let others take the consequences. The world has many ways of wounding us.

As a result, we can give up and retreat from the world and become isolated and insulated. We can resort to destructive addictions. We can cynically dismiss any idea of God or faith coming into the equation at all. Let's see how the Christian faith allows us to keep on when things seem to fall apart. How it doesn't so much solve the problems but give us a perspective from which to face and conquer them.

There was a time in the life of Jesus' followers when they were so perplexed that Jesus queried their perseverance with him. Peter, the spokesman of the group replied that there was no one else to turn to. Whatever problems they had with faith in Jesus, they recognised Jesus at least offered the truest form of life. Deserting him was like jumping from the frying pan of faith to the fire of agnosticism or atheism.

FOCUS ON GOD

When things seem to fall apart, our first priority has to be given to keeping relationship with God healthy. We can't afford to do anything else unless this is right. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that we are to seek God first, rather than focus on our immediate worries or concerns. Only as we put him first do the other things find their proper perspective.

I may be swamped by concerns about the problems of others, job issues, marital issues, church questions, family questions. I may be worried about money, the state of the world, my health. All valid concerns. But unless I tackle my relationship with God first, then I can't really tackle anything else with any effectiveness. When I recently listed a couple of dozen things that were troubling me, one was my lack of discipline in praying and reading the Bible. That was what I had to get to first. All the other things depended on that. I couldn't tackle all the other things effectively before I had anchored myself in God.

I focus on God by praying regularly, reading the Bible regularly, and meeting with his people and being taught by them regularly. This keeps my focus on God. In Old Testament times, the King of Judah, Jehoshaphat, was surrounded by enemies. They were threatening his very being. It was a life and death crisis. *2 CHRONICLES 20:12* has him saying, I don't know what to do, but my eyes are fixed on you. They didn't know what to do, but their eyes were fixed on God. All the military strategy, all the logistics, all the screaming and shouting had to take second place to focus on God who was the source of help, wisdom, and courage.

So we first focus on God. All else flows from our love of God and our dedication to go his way. We are swept this way and that by threatening circumstances. We have no solid ground. Things fall apart.

REPENT OF KNOWN SIN

Linked to this, the next thing we do when things seem to be falling apart is to take a good look at ourselves and see if there is something in us that needs changing. This saves us from self pity, whereby we blame the world, the government, the church, or random others for the predicament we are in. The wider world is in danger of playing the blame game. Blame the Arabs for terrorism. Blame the government for the collapse of companies or rising interest rates. Blame immigration for social unrest. Blame America for various ills and ailments afflicting our world. But this can be too simplistic.

This is not the perspective of the Bible when it comes to our personal failings. David the Psalmist is keenly aware that his troubled circumstances can at times be traced back to his own wrongdoing. Not all the time, but some of the time. *PSALM 51* is a good example. David can't blame anyone for the dry state he is in. He has wilfully disobeyed God and he is paying the price for it. He lacks the joy of salvation. He was in the depths because he had defied God. That had to be dealt with.

And it was. When we admit our wrongdoing, and ask God to help turn from it, he comes to our help. He will not despise a broken heart. He will forgive. No one is too far gone to come back to God. He doesn't have too hard baskets.

So we are to focus on God, and to do that we need to turn from those things which are distractions. We deal with the big issue of our relationship with God first. Otherwise, we put too much emphasis on secondary things which irritate us or destabilise us. If I am not consumed by the big affair of God and his purposes for me, I become consumed by the secondary, petty matters of pride, envy, comparison, discontentment, criticism, self pity, complaint. When we do get so consumed, we can only place ourselves again in the presence of a holy God and let his holy light dispel such darkness and have us realise what the real issues in life are. They boil down to the love God has for us, our indifference to him, God's grace, God's empowerment to live a new life.

So when things fall apart, we look to God and in doing so, realise our own shortcomings. We repent of them, rather than avoid them by playing a blame game or becoming self pitying victims of the unfairness of life, and the unfairness of others. This may seem very grim and dark, but it is quite the opposite. Only as we face the not so good news of our imperfections and lack of focus can we be open to embrace the good news of God's mercy and empowerment.

CONNECT WITH OTHERS

We are not meant to do all this alone. We are to grow up in Jesus, but we need each other to do so. When things fall apart, when we feel like giving up, we need one another. My focus fails often, so I need others to help me sharpen it. Changing my life focus is hard and painful. I need others to keep me honest. We are to be part of a community of fellow believers on a similar journey. We are companions amongst a great crowd of the broken hearted who are being mended and aim to experience the joy of friendship with God.

This is a risk. Sometimes people let me down. That doesn't surprise me, for the simple reason that I too let others down. We are all bruised reeds and smouldering embers, to use the words of the Bible. Jesus shared himself with a group of misfits who hurt him and misunderstood him. Yet those same misfits turned the world upside down. Whoever we trust to be companions on our life journey will let us down, as we will do them. But there is no viable alternative. We are on the road together. Our faith is very personal but not at all private.

Some people will be very close, others fairly close, others not close at all. Some people will be helpful in some areas, but not in others. Some people may bless you one day and drive you round the bend the next. This is inescapable and proper. It is life lived amongst a community of the forgiven. Whenever we form significant relationships, we open ourselves to hurt or pain. But we also open ourselves to growth and blessing. We can't have one without the other. To be open to love is to be open to hurt.

DO SOMETHING ACHIEVABLE

When things seem to fall apart, we sometimes feel paralysed. So much overwhelms us. Where to begin? We start by doing something achievable. You have to just get in and start somewhere. Every long and great journey begins with a single step. I looked recently at a list of things that troubled me or bewildered me. I could have been paralysed by it. It was a long list. There were some things on it that are ultimately unresolvable, given the vagaries of human nature and the lack of human perfection this side of heaven. There were some things that I couldn't figure out what to do about: here is where I claim the words of Jehoshaphat earlier: not sure of what to do, but I'll keep my eyes fixed on God.

We take a single step of keeping focus on God and the things that matter to him. So if my Bible reading had gone a bit stale, I could choose a different way of doing it. If I was having trouble with a particular church issue, I could arrange to meet someone to talk about it. If I was feeling a bit estranged from someone I could make time to contact them. In other words, we do what we can, rather than get overcome by what we can't do.

Life throws lots of mess at us, and we can't clean it all up. Life presents us with all sorts of mysteries, and we can't explain them all. God invites us to live with mess and mystery. It is not my job as a church minister, or any individual's job to clean up the mess or explain the mystery. That is beyond human achievement. It would also cause us to move away from God as we would not need to trust him as much.

It is my job as pastor and as a man of God to help myself and others live creatively and lovingly with the mess and the mystery. And one way we do this is to do what we can. Tackle what is achievable. This alleviates feelings of paralysis and fear and yet doesn't cause us to become wonder workers who have figured life out.

GIVE THANKFUL PRAISE

And then we give thanks to God and praise him no matter what. When things fall apart, we give thankful praise because we believe that in fact things are not falling apart. Nothing happens beyond the understanding of God. He isn't somehow stunned by world events. He remains good and remains God even if the world at large or our private worlds seem to be out of control. Sometimes we would like God to take up micro management of the world, fine tuning every little

detail, tidying up each and every mess made by wilful human beings. But if God stepped in like this we would lose our freedom and thus our humanness. We thank God he is in control, even if that control sometimes seems absent. God oversees our world and our lives and is willing to work good out of the evil if we will so let him.

This helps explain why the Bible tells us to give thanks in all circumstances. We are not to give thanks for all circumstances, because not all things are good. We don't thank God for acts of terrorism, but thank him for not abandoning his broken and divided world. I give thanks to God when things seem to fall apart in my own world not because it is good or feels good. But because God remains God and I can be sure he will bring about his purposes in my life through each and every thing that happens.

The Old Testament prophet Habakkuk says...

Hab 3:17-18 Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Saviour.

I can choose to be shaped by the things that fall apart around about me or by the unchanging rock of God. I can choose to be governed by circumstances or by God. I can choose to give up in despair or hang on in faith. For most of us, life is lived on the landscape of the mundane. For many of us, life is not about constant great leaps forward, but about small steps taken persistently and faithfully.

When that prayer doesn't get answered, when that healing doesn't occur, when that relationship refuses to be mended, when the world seems to fall apart, we are called on to persevere, to trust. Not in some blind or vaguely optimistic way. Not as a form of hopeful denial. Rather as an expression of our belief that God is ultimately working out his good purposes and along the mysterious way, he will never leave us. And so while things may fall apart, we need not.

The writer of the ancient Psalms knew what it was like to live in a troubled world. Here is what he says...

PSALM 46:1-7

1 God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. 2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, 3 though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging. 4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells. 5 God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day. 6 Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts. 7 The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.