

HABIT SIX

Handle Crises Constructively

“If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses? If you stumble in safe country, how will you manage in the thickets by the Jordan?”

Jeremiah 12:5

We experienced several personal relationship conflicts with fellow missionaries during our first term in Korea. Then, the next term I assumed the responsibilities of acting supervisor and chairman of the national board. The conflict of the first term was a picnic compared to the conflict of the second term. Yet we gained so very much valuable insight and personal and ministerial growth through the grief of that experience. It demonstrated how God teaches us and brings good out of tearful crises. However, at the time, the crisis seemed overwhelming and was based on such unfair misperceptions and misunderstandings!

Learning through Crises

In Habit 2, we learned that God tests and teaches dependence through intense pressure in human circumstances. A crisis is a time of increased pressure. God seeks our willful intent to move deeper into His heart in the early stages of a crisis so that He

may carry us through it. The end result is a stronger, more influential Christian with a deeper experience of God and the spiritual authority that accompanies it.

Experience with fasting and running marathons has taught me that much of the perseverance needed in times of testing stems from beginning with good, firm decisions. Once we make the decision, we can put our “decider” in neutral and our “doer” on automatic pilot. You can endure the inconvenience of fasting if you don’t have to decide not to eat every day or hour. You can also endure the fatigue of the marathon race if you don’t have to decide every mile that you are going to run to the end. Experience helps, but following through on the original decision is a major factor.

Even Jesus “resolutely set out for Jerusalem.” This seems to suggest that He decided — perhaps we could even say *determined* — that he would endure the cross and then follow through, having set Himself to do it. I recall how I felt after reading Luke 9 and 10 on Day 35 of my fast (Monday, June 11, 1979). The impression of what Jesus must have felt — that “betrayal is hard to endure” — was very deep. The translation I was reading then said that Jesus, after having made His decision, “moved steadily onward towards Jerusalem with an *iron will*” (Luke 9:51 *Living Bible*, emphasis mine). Jesus, our Example, demonstrated how to react to crises with righteous determination. In our case, the pressure we endure is necessary to make us more like Him. Our reactions to suffering show a watching world that Christ is within. Crises provide the increased pressure that makes such resolve and determination possible. They bring out the best or worst in us.

Yet, there is another element. Jesus “humbled himself and became obedient to death” (Philippians 2:8). The horrible death He endured demonstrated the submission of the divine and human Son to the Father’s plan. We don’t know how much refinement in learning obedience was still necessary in Jesus at that time; but in our case, refinement is certainly a possible outcome of crises. In the past, it was important to me to be right.

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I was too contentious and argumentative. More often than was prudent, I liked to let people know how correct I was. As I look back now on the old me — with a tough shell and a hard heart — I realize that I needed the crisis God allowed in 1979.

Why a Crisis is Necessary

Pressure on the individual experiencing a crisis is a necessary preparation that creates willingness, even eagerness, to change. God is not content to leave us as we are in our undeveloped or underdeveloped state. He allows crises so we can grow. When things continue as they are, we are not motivated to change. We usually like to stay with the comfortable pattern. In change theory, scholars refer to creating “dissonance” which causes people to become discontent with the status quo and therefore more willing to adopt an innovation. God, the greatest change agent, also seems willing to create some personal dissonance so that we are more willing to change. A crisis is necessary because we need it.

In early spring of 1979, I attended an Asian area gathering for missionaries and national leaders of our denomination held in Hong Kong. It was not yet a year into our second term in Korea and I was there with the pastor we have been calling the Rev. Mr. Park from Korea. It became apparent that the divisions that impaired our growth in Korea were not only grievous to us but also painfully obvious to others. I began praying even more seriously about these problems. That was when I decided to fast 40 days.

Just days later, our denominational missions leader visited us in Korea and attended a pastors’ meeting. Afterwards, Char and I drove them to Seoul where they were to catch their plane for the U.S. During that two-hour trip, I shared with our director, Jeff, and his wife, Ann, my desire to fast and pray for 40 days to see the church in Korea set free. His comment was that when he had conducted a fast of the same length years earlier, he found that

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he changed more than the situation had changed. He was quite willing for me to go on the fast.

Upon arrival in Seoul and just before we got out of the car, Char and I shared the story of a vision that Mary, a pastor's wife in the U.S. had seen of us. That had been about a year earlier while we were in the U.S. on furlough. In the vision, Mary saw a long line of Asians marching out of bondage into freedom as we led them. In our minds, the fact that we were at the head of the line in the vision meant that our ministries were going to be effective and fruitful among Asians. As a result of our leadership, people were indeed going to be led into new things spiritually. The vision had been an encouragement to us for almost a year by the time we shared it in the car on that spring day in 1979. We were glad God was giving us a place in such a victory march.

Ann misinterpreted our discussion. She assumed we were grasping for position, prestige, and power at the head of the line. She scolded and we wept. By that time in our

ministries in Korea, we had already shed enough tears for the freedom of the church. We understood our position was a responsibility before the Lord rather than something to be grasped. To be so severely misunderstood and criticized by the ones who had sent us to Korea was a shocking disappointment. I mention it here because this is the kind of pressure a crisis places on the servant of God. Fair or unfair is another question. My point is that the pressure on the individual can produce an intense desire toward God and a desperation that creates willingness to change.

Our need to change is the issue, and God uses a crisis to make us willing.

How You React Is the Whole Point

God loves us and believes in us — often more than we do. He knows our potential; we don't. Moreover, He knows how to apply the right amount of pressure through a crisis. The crisis is not the issue; it only prepares us. Our need to change is the issue, and God uses a crisis to make us willing. Since God knows how much we can take and our potential for development, the intensity of the crisis is the depth of the compliment God is paying us. On the other hand, God also knows how thick our