The Hammer and the Anvil

by Travis Deans

When I graduated from Bible College in 1996 as a youth ministry major, I had great expectations. I was very enthusiastic about starting full-time ministry, and I thought my spiritual life was top-notch. What I didn’t know was that I was about to enter into the school of the hammer and the anvil.

I thought I had a pretty good walk with the Lord, but what I really had was an untested character and a very naïve faith. In my excitement for doing ministry, I had no idea, really, of the dangers and pitfalls that were coming my way.

I began full-time ministry with an organization which had been a chapter of Youth for Christ at one time, and later became the youth ministry Network in our area. There were two of us working in the ministry: I and the guy whom God had used to call me into youth ministry. Things started out great, but my character weaknesses began showing right away.

Among other things, I found myself lying to cover up my mistakes and hiding my activities so that I could do what I wanted to do rather than what my boss wanted. There were times when I failed to stand up and take charge of situations in which I needed to provide leadership, and resorting instead to being nice and non-confrontational. I also found myself – and still do – struggling with loving doing ministry more than loving God. Being confronted with these and many other immaturities and faults felt like more than I could bear. I had no idea that I was such a mess!

Somewhere along the way, I came across a book written by Max Lucado called On the Anvil. In it, Max talks about how God hammers away at us to make us tools or instruments fit for His use. I knew that my difficulties were God’s way of putting me on the anvil and hammering away at my imperfections. However, more often than not, I felt like Wyle E. Coyote who was always having anvils dropped on top of him! Confrontations over my failures were a constant experience for years – sort of like Chinese water torture - for myself and for those with whom I had to work.

There were numerous times when I felt that the crushing pain of confronting my spiritual deficiencies was just not worth the agony. I felt like moving on and going elsewhere many times, but in my heart I knew that if I ran away from this pain, I would only run straight back into it, because the source of the pain was God working on me! I would have to face these things no matter where I would go. So I stayed.

I don’t remember when, but I picked up Gene Edward’s little book, A Tale of Three Kings. There I read his retelling of the life of King David. David was chosen for the role of king of Israel. But little did he know that God was enrolling him in the school of brokenness. He would spend more than 10 years in suffering – running and hiding in caves from a man who wanted to kill him. Gene Edwards brilliantly says that God was using the outer Saul to destroy the inner Saul. Without that crushing, David would only have become King Saul II.

Many other of God’s chosen servants have gone through periods of intense, crushing pain. Joseph lived for years as a slave and prisoner. Moses spent 40 years in the wilderness before God was ready to use him. Daniel and his friends were taken captive and exiled from the land that they loved. To follow God is to follow Him down the path of pain and suffering. Even Jesus was led by the Spirit of God into the wilderness where He was severely tested. And of course, Jesus knows the pain of the hammer far more than we ever shall, for He was pierced by nails.

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God has also used the books of John Eldredge to help me understand what He was – and is – doing in my life. In my times of pain, God has been chipping away the false self; the “me” I had created to protect myself and to cover up who I really was. Not only that, but my pain and difficulties were the ways in which God was initiating me into manhood. I was starting to get it: no pain, no gain. Now finally, I am starting to welcome and be thankful for the work of the hammer. It’s been over 10 years since I first started full-time ministry and the hammering continues. But what I have found is that while God is the hammer striking hard on this heart that needs much shaping and molding, God is also the anvil holding me up and making me strong.

Now that I’ve been at this a few years, I’m seeing so many young guys, coming out of college just like me 10 years ago. They are getting into ministries and finding it excruciatingly difficult. Some of them are working with senior pastors who are jealous or threatened by them. Some of them are getting beat down by parents and church boards with outrageous expectations. Some of them are struggling to pay their bills and keep their families afloat.

I want to say to them, through the most miserable, rotten experiences you are having, “God is at work. He is the hammer that you are being struck by, but He is also the anvil who will hold you up and keep you and make you fit for noble purposes. Don’t be too quick to run away from the situation you find yourself in. If God doesn’t shape you where you are, He’ll only have to do it somewhere else. Let the hammer fall and rest in the God strong enough to uphold you.”

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