

Practical Keys to Keep Your Heart Soft Toward God in Hard Seasons

Have you ever gone through a hard time that lasted more than just a day or a week? Maybe you've been in the middle of a battle for a whole season, or perhaps even years. I know that these times can suck the life out of you, and leave you feeling dry, discouraged and alone. It can even feel like there's no way out. When tough times turn to a tough life, it can be easy to become disillusioned and even cynical toward your life, toward the church or toward God's goodness. It's important to realize that this doesn't have to be your story!

Tough Times Build Character

Let me tell you about a personal story of a hard time that turned into a hard season for my family. In the early 1980s, Kathy and I owned one auto parts store and we (mostly I) decided to expand our business into two other cities. My decision turned out to have a treacherous effect on our cash flow to the point that we barely had money to feed our family. Our three children were little and we had strong convictions that they needed a full-time mom at home. This made it impossible for Kathy to work outside of the house to help pay our bills.

So, she set up her desk in our home and did all of our accounting and oversaw our finances while she simultaneously took care of our small children. This was no easy task, but we worked hard and kept growing. Over time, Kathy developed into a great CFO of our four businesses in three locations with 40 employees. Yet the faster we grew, the tighter things became financially, especially at home. Personally, I felt like I was carrying the weight of the world on my shoulders. Growing a

business from scratch can be agonizing, but growing three businesses all at the same time is like a mother having triplets—you will have stretch marks for life. The truth we found from this season, which I know now is universal, is that you might forget the pain you were in, but you never forget the intensity of the labor it took to give birth to your dreams. At the end of the day, tough times build character.

When It Just Won't Let Up

Even if you have the strength to endure challenges, sometimes you go through seasons when the mere frequency of things going wrong can be discouraging and overwhelming. One of the worst things that can happen in these seasons is that you begin to expect things to go wrong. Expectation is the fruit of faith. In other words, you believe and therefore empower destructive outcomes; simply put, by faith, your life is horrible.

You must avoid the temptation to “go with the flow” and “faith” your way into a miserable life. For example, have you ever bent over to pick up a box thinking it was going to be really heavy, and instead it was incredibly light? Or, on the other hand, have you ever picked up something you thought would be extra light and found it to be extremely heavy? Our expectations of life's circumstances determine whether or not we're prepared for them. But some people always prepare for the worst so that they won't be disappointed. They reason that if something then goes better than expected, they will be encouraged.

The challenge is that expectation is actually the manifestation of faith, and you tend to receive what you believe. Therefore, life gets harder when you think it will, and easier when you expect it to be. Of course, all of us have been surprised when something unexpected goes wrong. However, it's important that you don't turn bad circumstances into a lifetime of cynicism and thus invite trouble into your life.

8 Practical Keys to Avoid Getting Cynical

Cynicism can creep in if we don't manage our hearts well. So, here are eight practical keys to avoid cynicism that I encourage you to practice frequently when in a tiring season:

1. Look for Jesus in the midst of your troubles. He tends to hang out in hard places.
2. Remember God's past miracles and works in your life.
3. Cultivate thankfulness in your heart no matter how you "feel."
4. Avoid the "misery loves company" syndrome by disciplining yourself to hang around happy people when you don't feel like it.
5. Pray in the Spirit, because the Bible says you "edify yourself" when you do.
6. Take a mental vacation. Give yourself permission to take a break each day from thinking about your problems. Cultivate some happy thoughts.
7. Remember the Bible says, "It came to pass!" In other words, it came so it could pass—this season will end.
8. Remind yourself that everything works out for good in the end. So if it isn't good, it isn't the end.

As you read this list, I bless your spirit to receive the truth that God wants to reveal to you today. I pray that no matter what you're facing, you would be encouraged and have the courage to face each day with hope and the knowledge that God is with you.

Have you ever found yourself becoming cynical? What have you done to overcome it? Let me know in the comments below. {eo}

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