

“A New Challenge” Part 3 - More on how to recognise a new challenge from God. August 2024

Thames Valley churches of Christ

Introduction

After exploring 'A New Thing' and 'A New Creation' we are now engaged in the theme, 'A New Challenge'. Are you facing new challenges? Is your group facing new challenges? Last time we surveyed the book of Acts for instances when the early church recognised a challenge as God's invitation to spiritual growth and adventure. Today, we will explore the same topic from some different angles. We'll look at pain, doors and visions.

1. Pain

Many years ago, I was having a conversation with a friend exploring how I could figure out where in my spiritual life God was trying to help me grow. That person asked me, "Where does it hurt?". Instantly, I knew what it was. Is this what happened to the Apostle Paul?

2 Corinthians 12.7-10

“Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”

Was he struggling with over-elation? It looks like it. How did God help Paul? He gave him a thorn. Ouch! Fortunately, Paul recognised God's good purpose in the pain and grew through the new challenge to a place of contentment.

Questions: Where are you hurting right now? Where is your group hurting? Could that be God's new challenge to you towards spiritual growth?

2. Doors

Sometimes, a new challenge looks like an open door. Open doors can be a new neighbour moving in next door, a family member asking to know more about the church, your teenager asking questions about the Bible, or a stranger stopping to talk to you for no apparent reason. Open door challenges are exciting. However, the thing about them is that someone always seems to be trying to close them from the other side. It looks like that was what Paul was feeling when he was in Ephesus.

1 Corinthians 16.8

“But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.”

Questions: Can you spot any open doors God has given you or your group? Do you have any opposition? What difference would it make if you prayed about it? What changes do you need to make to your current schedule to make the most of the open door?

3. Visions

How do you feel about having a vision from God? It's a bit 'out there,' isn't it?

Acts 16.9-10

“During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.”

What strikes me about this new challenge for Paul and his companions is the almost commonplace way in which it is recorded. It is no strange thing to Paul that God resorts to a vision so as to direct him into a new challenge.

This speaks to me to make me guard against making assumptions about how God will direct me into new challenges. Perhaps God will give me a dream or a vision. Why not? Plenty of people in Scripture had that kind of experience, and there's no reason to think he will not do so today.

Question: Is it possible that you are limiting God's ability to lead you into a new challenge by shutting off channels for his communication?

Conclusion

If we are truly open to a new challenge, God will find the best way to reveal it to us. It could be through pain, an open door or even a vision. Why should we not expect such guidance today if we pray and ask God to 'speak'?

Your brother, Malcolm

Please add your comments on this week's topic. We learn best when we learn in community.

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