

WHEN THINGS GO PEAR-SHAPED



When everything goes pear-shaped, how do you cope?

The answer to that question is crucial in life and especially church life. In our first two years here in Manaus nothing *we had planned* or envisioned materialised. The church from which we came to church plant, became a source of deep sadness and distress: satanic opposition, terrible division, stressful church meetings, Christians coming to near blows and finally an exodus of many "Christians". *Our* strategies lay in shreds and there was no success story. But we learnt some incredible things along this painful journey that *God, our loving Heavenly Father*, allowed us to tread. Here are some:

Perseverance: Trials or troubles produce this, as well as character and hope in God when all is dark and the trial is ongoing and the thorn in the flesh is not removed. We had trouble for two years and the stress mounted up and became daily reality. We nearly left but God gave us the grace to persevere to the end.

God's amazing grace: In times of soul agony, depression, immense sadness, feelings of complete and utter rejection, God always gave grace and comfort, often through his people in amazing ways. He allowed us breathers out of the situation just when we felt we couldn't take any more – a mission conference away where we could just unwind, be fed and restored through good bible ministry and given strength to go back and face the heat. Also, time-out in England, when we didn't know if we would continue in the church or not. In our absence God worked in an amazing way and the opposition melted away.

Awareness of personal sin and failure: Trials can bring out the best or worst in us. There were times when I let the Lord down and wasn't self-controlled. I had to confess and repent and pray for grace to act with grace and love. God is never finished with sanctifying us this side of heaven.

Forgiveness: Can I really love my enemy when those enemies are folk within the realm of the church who have turned nasty? And when they keep on hurting, and conspiring for your removal? Forgiveness 70 times 7 as Jesus taught? Only in utter dependence on God is this possible, and I

still have to deal with feelings of resentment and bitterness. I find the best way is to pray for God to help me let go of any remaining sinful feelings.

Spiritual warfare: We had to fast and pray a lot for the removal of demonic influence. We had never experienced (nor want to again) such opposition against the ministry but as the writer to the Hebrews says, it wasn't to the point of bloodshed, like Stephen or Paul. The Scriptures became so real, especially the psalms – "*This poor man cried and the Lord heard him, and delivered him out of all his fears.*" But also challenging verses such as, "Blessed are you when all men speak evil of you...rejoice...for great is your reward in heaven." We didn't feel blessed or feel like rejoicing but that is what Christ commanded us to do!

The future

The last year has been one of recovery as the church came to terms with the division that had taken place. We all felt that there had been a ripping apart. The Lily of the Valley church is so different now to when we first came. We are a smaller group of believers but unified, and the legalistic hardline spirit has gone. Church meetings aren't the arena to incriminate one another but rather the positive platform to seek God's will for the advance of the gospel. We are still all being moulded by the Lord but the cold atmosphere has been lifted.

The Lord has now brought us all to the point of opening a new congregation in São Pedro, on the outskirts of Manaus in a very needy area. The Lord reduced our numbers and it seems impossible that we are at this stage just a year on. There is also weekly outreach in Nova Cidade, another needy part of Manaus, and outreach into the local school. The church is looking outward not inward and this is positive. Please keep praying for us. We are fragile and aware that we have this treasure – Christ within us – in jars of clay, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. The devil is still out to attack, to discourage, to disunite and ultimately to destroy but, as we have already learnt, our God is ALMIGHTY to defend and deliver, to lift us up and to lead us on, united and victorious. "Blessed be the name of the Lord". ■

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