

## EMPLOYING YOUR EXPERIENCES

In 1809, Simon and his wife Monique welcomed their fourth child into the world-- a lively boy named Louis. They lived in a small stone house near Paris where Simon was the local harness maker. Leather working tools are dangerous, so the toddler had been instructed not to go into his father's shop alone. But when Louis was still small, he slipped into the shop, and with curiosity started to handle all the fascinating tools. As Louis was inspecting an awl, the sharp tool used to punch holes in leather; he slipped and punctured a part of his eye with the tool. The injured eye became infected. The little boy could not keep his hands from rubbing and scratching the wound, and soon the infection spread to his other eye as well. When Louis was only 4, he became completely blind.

Louis was fortunate enough to study at the Royal Institution for Blind Youth in Paris. He excelled as an organist, and at twelve years old began asking the question "How can the blind read?" Over his summer break at home, Louis was determined to find the answer. As He moved and groped around his father's shop in search of the right tool for his task, the awl presented itself as perfect for the job. The awl would make the raised dots he had seen in the French military system of "night writing." And with the very instrument that had blinded him, Louis Braille worked and worked until he had created a system of dots whereby the blind could read and write, work math problems and compose music. The Braille system he invented is still used by millions of people today.

What is your awl - the thing that has crippled you, either by your own doing like young Louis, or someone else's? Is it a divorce, the death of someone you love, a lost career? Let God take it, and use it in your life for good - to reshape you or comfort others.

Over the past few weeks we have going through a series looking at our SHAPE. Today we are concluding this series with the last letter E which stands for EXPERIENCES. God wants you to use the experiences of your life – the good, bad and ugly for His glory.

Rom 8:28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

This verse does not say that all things are good or that all things work out the way I want them to. We know that's not true. It also does not say that everything has a happy ending on this earth because it doesn't. We live on a broken planet. It does say that we are certain that all things in life can be used for good when covered by the grace God gives to those who are in a relationship with Him.

One of the reasons we worship God is because He can take the mess of my life and bring a message out of it. He can take our tests and create a testimony out of them. He can take the bad things in my life and He can bring even good out of that.

I like chocolate chip cookies but the raw ingredients that go in to them individually do not all taste great. Did you ever eat a little shortening or raw egg or salt and sugar by itself? Somehow when you mix five bad things with one good thing and you stir them up together it is good. That's what God wants to do with your life. He wants to take the bad things and turn them into something great. So how do I keep from wasting the experiences I've had in my life up to this point? Let's look at three things:

1. You EMBRACE your experiences -

You must embrace the experiences of your life – the good ones, the bad ones, the right ones, the wrong ones, the happy and the sad ones – all of them. You’ve got to stop running from your past if God’s going to use it for good in your life.

Gal 3:4 Have you suffered so much for nothing -- if it really was for nothing?

Don’t run away from your past. The problem is that because of pain, many people deny or reject their past. They try to forget it or rewrite it or deny it. God can use every experience in my life for good. The relational, the educational, the spiritual, the vocational, the painful – all of them. The ones you liked and the ones you didn’t like. He can use them all but you’ve got to stop running from them. You have to embrace your experiences.

There is no situation so chaotic that God cannot from that situation, create something that is surpassingly good. He did it at the creation. He did it at the cross. He is doing it today. — Handley C. G. Moule

One way to embrace your experiences is to keep a journal. I’m not talking about a diary. A diary is a list of what you did: “Today I went to the store and bought milk.” In a journal you don’t necessarily write every day. It’s just that every time you have an important lesson you write that down because you don’t want to forget it. “That was painful, I learned that the hard way, I don’t want to forget that.” You write down the lesson and learn from it.

The power of a journal is the fact that hindsight is always twenty-twenty. You understand your life looking backward, not looking forward. You almost never understand what God is doing in your life in the present. It is only looking back that you see it.

John 13:7 Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

Joseph was a man in the Bible, everything in his life went wrong for forty years. He was kidnapped, sold into slavery, thrown into jail for a rape that he did not commit. Everything went wrong in this poor guy’s life for the first forty years. Yet later, he saw that God had used all of it to raise him up to second in command in Egypt during the famine. Because of this he was able to save Israel and Egypt from starving to death. When he later confronted his brothers he said this, “*You intended to harm me but God intended it for good.*”

There are things in your life where people intended to hurt you and they meant it. They intended it for bad but God is greater than your problem and your pain and His purpose is far bigger than either of those. He means it for good. Embrace your experiences and stop running from them.

2. You EXTRACT the lessons -

This means that you pull the lessons out of the experience you have had. An unexamined experience is worthless. There are people who are fifty years old that are still making the same mistakes because they never stopped to extract the lessons: “What happened in this last year and how can I live differently based on what I have learned?”

2 Cor 13:5 Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you -- unless, of course, you fail the test?

God is always with us. When you thought you were your most lonely He was right there with you. Look at where your life is headed. You need to go back and examine and test and evaluate what has brought you this far. What does that mean? You take some time to review the experiences of your life. What do you look for? You look for benefits, patterns and lessons.

First you look for benefits. What did I really enjoy in my life? That will help you understand your SHAPE. Not just the class you attended but what exactly about that class did I like? This will give you clues about where you should be headed with your life.

Second you look for patterns. Specifically you want to look for patterns of failure. Where did you fail in the past and did you always seem to fail in the same way or situation. Don't just feel sorry for yourself but learn from the past. What are the patterns that I keep doing over and over and over?

\* Those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it.

This was the problem with the Israelites. They were freed from four hundred years of slavery but it took them 40 years to reach the Promised Land. Why? Because they refused to learn experiences and the lessons that they needed to learn. So God would give them a test and they'd blow it. They'd forget and God would say "Ok. One more lap around the desert." Then they'd fail another test – one more lap around the desert. They did it seven times and it took them forty years for something that should have taken them only a few weeks.

Job 32:7 I thought, 'Age should speak; advanced years should teach wisdom.' 8 But it is the spirit in a man, the breath of the Almighty, that gives him understanding. 9 It is not only the old who are wise, not only the aged who understand what is right.

There are many old people who are still dumb. Wisdom does not automatically come with age. Maturity is when you extract meaning from the everyday experiences of life. You're able to look at the things in your life, the normal every day things and learn from them.

The amazing thing about the school of experience is two things. One, if you fail the test that's ok; you get to take it over... and over and over and over. Until you pass it. The second thing about the school of experience is just about the time you think you've graduated they add another course. You will be in that school the rest of your life. You embrace your experiences, you extract the lessons and...

3. You EMPLOY them to help others -

When you finally realize that the purpose of your life is far greater than your own happiness then problems become a whole lot easier to handle. You begin to see everything from a different perspective. You start using the experiences of your life (good and bad) to help other people.

Phil 1:12 Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel

Paul says here that the things that happened to him were actually beneficial for the ultimate goal – sharing the good news. Remember what Paul endured to get to this place. He was in prison for 3 years, taken on a ship to Rome, been in a ship wreck, bitten by a snake, now he's thrown in prison in a dungeon, cuffed to a 24 hour Roman guard. Still he is able to say that God was using it for good - that the Gospel was spreading all over Rome. Paul didn't just cry and complain about his situation.

Instead he saw the bigger perspective. You embrace your experiences, extract the lessons and then use them to bless others.

So how do you use them to bless others? God wants you to use your experiences in four ways.

a. Use them to *Minister* to others -

2 Cor 1:3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

God takes us through problems, comforts us, helps us, and strengthens us in our problems so that then we can comfort, help and strengthen others when they go through the same things. God blesses us to be a blessing to others. God helps us so we can help others. Every experience that you have gone can be used to help somebody else.

Luke 22:32 But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers

Who can better help somebody going through cancer than somebody who's been through cancer? Who can help somebody dealing with an addiction. Who can better help somebody deal with the pain of divorce than somebody who's been there and knows what it's like. Who can better help the parents of a special needs child than parents who had a special needs child?

This list could go on and on. The principle is that God never wastes a hurt. He wants to use them to benefit and bless other people. The thing that you're most embarrassed about, that you most regret, that injustice, that prejudice, that hurt, that wound, that sin, that mistake, the thing that you'd like to keep in the closet and say that's over, I'm not going to think about it ever again, that's not my life any more. That very thing can become your greatest ministry.

b. Use them to *Motivate* others.

Your experiences can be inspirational to many people because you have been through things and been places that they have not yet gone through. Through this you can motivate them.

1 Thess 5:11 Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

Our experiences can encourage people. This happens in three ways: You can give people hope. You can help people overcome their fears. And you can help people break down barriers.

Hope is powerful. You give people hope when you show people that what you have gone through can be done. You show it can be done. Ever been on a roller coaster? You see the ride and you don't want to try it until someone says "This is a great ride. I've been on it five times." This makes you think you will be OK. You will survive. Having someone already gone through it is an inspiration. It's motivational.

How many of you mothers, when you were in your first pregnancy felt scared to death, incompetent, unprepared and inadequate. Then the baby is born but starts crying and you can't make it stop!

How grateful were you when someone came along and just assured you, “Babies cry. It’s ok to let them cry. This is normal.” All the fears that you’re having, they’re normal.

You help people break through barriers when you motivate them with your own experience. Roger Bannister was the first guy to break the four-minute mile, running. At that time everybody said, it’s humanly impossible. No human being could run that fast or ever will run that fast. It’s an impossible barrier. Like breaking the sound barrier and things like that. Yet within about twelve months after Roger Bannister broke the four-minute mile about a dozen other guys had done it. All of a sudden people realized it could be done. Then everybody went out and did it. Like climbing Mount Everest or swimming the English Channel.

c. Use them to *Model* for others -

Phil 3:17 Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you.

Paul says here to “follow my example”. He says he was acting as a model. The word MODEL means a smaller representation of the real thing. Kids build model cars and model planes. They are smaller representation of the real thing.

God wants you to be a model. That is what the word “Christian” means – a little Christ. It is a smaller representation of the real thing. We are not Jesus, just smaller imperfect replicas. As people see our lives they see in some small way Christ in us. Paul understood human nature. All of us like to imitate others. Practically everything you learn in the first five years of life you learn by imitation. That’s how you learn.

Have you ever used a pattern? If you’ve ever sewn anything or done any woodwork you use a pattern. There’s nothing wrong with that. It’s the quickest way to reduce mistakes and save time. In fact, if you want to succeed in life, the fastest way is to find somebody who is already where you want to be and follow after their model. Don’t think you have to figure everything out all on your own. Take a model and follow it.

Jesus was the greatest teacher who ever lived because He modeled His message. He was the incarnation of truth. The word became flesh and Jesus’ life was His message. He said this is how you do it, and then He did it.

John 13:15 I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.

The problem is that growing up you didn’t get to choose your model. If you were fortunate enough to have good models in your life you grew up pretty healthy. On the other hand if you had some bad models in your life, you grew up with some wounds.

The good news today is that you get to choose your model. You don’t have to stay with the ones you had as a kid. You can go out and read books and listen to tapes and read biographies and get into contact with people. You need to have models in your life and you need to be a model. If you’re not you’re wasting your experiences. You’re letting them be pain in your life rather than good. Sometimes a person can model one area of life but not every area. You don’t want to be like that person but you are going to pattern *that* area of life after that other person. E.g. Max Lucado.

d. Use them to *Mentor* others.

Mentoring is far more intentional than simply ministering or motivating or modeling. Mentoring is when you actually say I'm going to take an interest in this particular person's life and I'm going to help them along.

1John 1:1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched -- this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.

John says here he passed it on so that now his readers could pass it on to others. A mentor is simply an experienced trusted counselor or guide. The word MENTOR comes from Homer's poem THE ODESSY. The king goes off to fight the Trojan war and leaves his kingdom in the hands of a trusted counselor named Mentor. Mentor teaches and raises up the king's son.

A mentor is a personal coach. It's intentional. Coaches bring out the best in you. They see in you things that you don't see in yourself. A mentor helps you with three areas. Role, goal and soul. Your role is what do you want to do with your life? Your goal is what do you want to accomplish in your life? Your soul is what are you becoming in life?

In the Middle Ages education was done through mentors. You would be apprenticed to a master craftsman and they would train and teach you one on one. Mentors are still used today. Why? Because no matter how successful you are or how successful you think you are, you always need a mentor. It's how you get to the top. In fact you're not going to get to the top without a mentor. You've got to have people who are speaking into your life.

Prov 25:12 Like an earring of gold or an ornament of fine gold is a wise man's rebuke to a listening ear.

Where are you at today? As one song puts it "Lord, I offer my life to You. Everything I've been through, use it for Your glory. Lord, I offer my day to You. Lift up my praise to You as a living sacrifice. Lord, I offer You my life."

Embrace your experiences. Extract the lessons and then use them to encourage others. Use your experiences to minister, motivate, model and mentor those around you.

Chippie the parakeet was simply minding his own business and signing his song one day when his owner decided to clean out his cage with the vacuum cleaner. The phone rang and the lady went to answer it and that was when things began to go horribly wrong for little Chippie. Without the guidance of the woman the business end of the vacuum cleaner sucked up the bird and sent him to the dust bag. Realizing what had happened the woman tore open the vacuum and ripped apart the bag to find Chippie, fearing the worst. However, Chippie was not dead but merely stunned and covered with dust. The woman decided that he needed to be revived and ran to the bathroom sink. She turned the water on and stuck Chippie under the flow. Now Chippie is cold and wet from the sudden bath. So the owner decides to dry the bird off but not with a towel. She gets out her hair dryer and blows the bird off. Chippie goes from being sucked up, to being nearly drowned to being blown over. The owner was asked by a friend a few weeks later about how Chippie was doing, she replied: "Chippie doesn't sing much anymore, he just sits and stares. Can anyone here relate to Chippie? Have you ever had an experience in your life when you were just minding your own business and then everything changed?"