

Curse or Consecrate: Two Ways for Christians to View a Conflict

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Conflict can be seen in two ways that are fundamentally different. One way is to look at it as an inevitable negative experience that we should simply endure. The other view of conflict sees it as an opportunity that God can use to accomplish much good.

How I Got Involved

One of my earliest insights into this dichotomy occurred just before I graduated from law school. After three years of legal study, I realized that I had little desire to practice law. My first love was still engineering, and I missed the problem-solving challenges of my original profession. In addition, I had come to realize that the adversarial legal system brought out my worst characteristics, including pride, aggressiveness, and a compelling desire to win arguments. I had a growing fear that if I spent much time in the legal system, this side of my personality would grow even worse.

So there I was, just a few months from graduation, trying to figure out what to do with a degree and a profession I no longer wanted. The more I agonized over the situation, the more I looked at my law degree as a form of bondage ... a trap ... a dead end. I grimly looked ahead to a career that held no promise of enjoyment or fulfillment.

The Lord dramatically changed this attitude one Sunday morning when my pastor preached from the book of Philippians, and God spoke to me through a letter that is nearly two thousand years old. The apostle Paul wrote this epistle from a prison in Rome. He had been placed in chains because of his determination to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. As my pastor explained, there were two ways that Paul could deal with the chains that bound him to his prison. He could either curse those chains, or he could consecrate them.

Paul's Choice

By God's grace, Paul chose the latter option. Instead of losing heart and resigning himself to months or even years of meaningless imprisonment, he chose to consecrate his situation to God. To consecrate something means to declare it sacred, to devote it irrevocably to the worship of God. Paul knew that the Lord was all-loving and all-

powerful, and he trusted that God would work for his good even in that miserable situation (Phil. 1:27-30; Rom. 8:28-29). Therefore, Paul could sincerely pray, "This is your situation, my Lord. Show me how I can use it to please and honor you."

Paul's choice to consecrate his wretched situation to God produced a chain of events that has impacted millions of people. His confidence in God and his refusal to be silenced encouraged other Christians to "speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly" (Phil. 1:14), which fueled the spread of the gospel. Even members of Caesar's household noticed the depth and intensity of Paul's faith (1:13). As a result, many of them also put their trust in Christ (4:22).

In addition to blessing millions of others through the centuries, Paul himself was blessed by his choice to consecrate his chains to Christ. He knew that regardless of what anyone else did, he would have a clear conscience before God (1:20). His fellowship with Christ would not be broken, and with that assurance, he knew he could not lose. As he wrote, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (1:21).

Paul's godly response to his situation also protected him from the self-pity that would have been more crippling than miles of iron chains. Instead of dwelling on his own suffering, he focused his thoughts and prayers on the Lord Jesus and on the needs of his brothers and sisters in Christ (1:24-28). This attitude gave him such great freedom that he mentions "joy" or "rejoicing" fourteen times in just this one letter--a letter written from prison!

My Conviction

As I heard these things that Sunday years ago, I came under deep conviction. Even though my chains were far less burdensome than Paul's, I had done nothing but curse them. I had been grumbling and complaining in my spirit, looking for an avenue of escape. Ultimately I was nurturing a resentment that was directed against God, who had providentially set my feet on the path to law school (Prov. 16:9).

As I saw the depth of my sin, I was crushed. After everyone left the worship service, I walked to the altar and knelt before the Lord. I confessed my sinful attitude toward God and asked his forgiveness for the negative, hopeless thoughts I had nurtured for months. Then I officially consecrated my law degree to him, promising to use my legal training faithfully to serve him and any clients he would bring to me.

An enormous weight was lifted from my shoulders. The hopelessness I had been carrying was gone, and it was replaced with a peace that defied understanding (Phil. 4:4-7). I still didn't know exactly where he wanted me to go with my legal profession, and I still had some lingering apprehensions as to where I would end up practicing law. But those fears were very small compared to the sense of freedom and joy that God gave to me. As a result, I couldn't help singing all the way back to my apartment.

I did not expect any dramatic events to result from my decision that morning. I was already committed to a one-year federal clerkship, and I assumed that I would then find a place in a local law firm. But God had other plans.

At four o'clock that same afternoon, my telephone rang. The caller introduced himself as Laury Eck. He went on to say, "I'm an attorney who works with a ministry called the Christian Conciliation Service. I'm planning a trip to Montana next month, and I'm trying to find a local contact who might be interested in developing a biblically based mediation service."

As he went on to describe the work of the Christian Conciliation Service, my heart began to pound. I'd never heard of the ministry before, but I was immediately drawn to its potential for reconciling people and resolving legal disputes in a cooperative rather than adversarial manner. The more Laury told me, the more interested I became. I quickly agreed to meet with him a few weeks later.

Just before he hung up, I asked him how he had gotten my name. "Oh," he said, "I just picked it from a list of students who are involved in the Christian Legal Society Bible study at your law school."

Within fifteen months of that conversation, the Christian Conciliation Service of Montana was formally established, and I was named as its executive director. In 1993, the CCS of Montana merged with the Association of Christian Conciliation Services and became what is now Peacemaker Ministries. God has blessed this ministry greatly; however, it has not been without its struggles. Stubborn clients and limited finances have often tempted me to grumble and complain. But again and again God has helped me to stop cursing the problems and instead to consecrate these challenges to him.

I must say that I have rarely seen a repeat of the swift external results that God graciously provided to me the first time I consecrated my "chains" to him. But I have always been blessed by a decision to dedicate a difficult situation to the Lord, even when he did not change things as quickly or completely as I wanted. The knowledge that God is pleased and honored with such choices is blessing enough. But he often adds to it the confidence and peace of mind that Paul celebrated in his prison two thousand years ago.

Consecrating Our Conflicts

It has also been my privilege to help many conciliation clients to renounce their natural tendency to curse a conflict and choose instead to consecrate it to the Lord Jesus. Many of their situations have involved problems far more difficult than the dilemma I faced when graduating from law school. I have seen people dealing with the pain of marital infidelity, a failing business, chronic abuse, a church division, or a vindictive lawsuit. But God's principles do not change according to the severity of our problems. Whether we are involved in a minor disagreement or a life-changing conflict, he calls us to make the same choice. We can either curse the problem and take matters into our own hands, or we can consecrate the situation to God, trust in his Word, and depend on him to guide us through

it, even if that means we must endure a certain amount of suffering (Phil. 1:29-30; Rom. 5:1-5; 2 Cor. 12:7-10; 1 Pet. 2:18-25, 4:12-16).

Whenever we curse our struggles and conflicts, we inevitably squander opportunities to bring glory to God, serve others, and grow to be more like Christ. But when we respond to God's grace by consecrating our difficulties to him, there is no limit to the good that can be accomplished, even when that good seems far away at the time.

For when we consecrate our struggles and conflicts to God, it is not really the apostle Paul we are imitating. It is the Lord Jesus himself. From the beginning to the end of his epic conflict against sin and darkness, he continually consecrated himself and everything he faced to his Father. At the climax of that great struggle, he reaffirmed his dedication with these marvelous words, "Not my will, but yours be done" and "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 22:42; 23:46).

The path has been well marked. Whether you are faced with impending death, prolonged imprisonment, or the ordinary conflicts of life, you too have daily choices to make. May you choose to consecrate all things to him, to the praise of his glorious grace!