

At Peace in the Winter

By Bobby Schuller

It's getting colder outside. We Californians, we're suffering from a 56 degree temperature this morning. I'm surprised you even made it to church today. But as we reflect on the chilliness, as it were.

No, I want to talk about this idea of winter, a spiritual winter, emotional winters that we go through in our life. Maybe you're in a winter today and you're wondering why am I here. You're the person I'm talking to today. I want you to know God is going to get you through your winter, that you're not in your winter alone, and that I love you, the Lord loves you and this church loves you, and you're going to get through.

Joseph Campbell is this great philosopher who wrote and observed that every great epic story follows the same sort of pattern. From the epic of Gilgamesh, all the way through to Harry Potter you see that there's this theme, a story that goes something like this: the hero is living a comfortable life. Everything is fine. And all of a sudden a guide comes along, that is Gandalf or Obi-Wan Kenobi. And the hero comes along and disrupts their world, bringing them out of their comfortable life and thrusting them into a new journey, something that has to be done. Something that is central to their life. And they face many challenges with their friends and with this guide, but ultimately they face a huge challenge, very often alone, a challenge that almost kills them, a

challenge they don't know if they will get through. And when they press through that challenge, they come through the crucible changed, remade, renewed, and they return home to that comfortable world they came from with boons. A boon is a special thing, a treasure like a magic sword, a ring that makes you invisible, a light saber, something like that. And as they come back, they bring this boon with them, which is a symbol of their change and they go to change the world in which they were comfortably placed.

And what's crazy is as you see and you read the great fairy stories and epic movies: Pulp Fiction and Matrix and Lord of the Rings and yes, Star Wars and all of these, they follow this same story. And there's a reason that for thousands of years, this pathway of the hero resonates so much with men and women. And the reason is this is how life is. That we, as believers in particular, are called out from our comfortable lives to do something very uncomfortable that will threaten to destroy us. But, it will not destroy us and we will come through with boons, with treasures, with knowledge, a changed person passing through the crucible.

What we know as we get older is that there's many times in our lives where we have these seasons of struggle, of challenge that almost destroy us. We face something we could not have predicted. Very often we face those things alone. And what we know as we live longer, we recognize very often those are some of the best things that ever happened to us.

Today I'm going to refer to those wilderness moments, those crucible moments as winters. I think winter is the perfect metaphor because winter is the time when everything sort of stops. It's the time when the world is the most dangerous naturally.

And I want to talk about winter for a moment. The experience of winter itself is something that's perspectival, right? I mean it has to do with your perspective is how you're going to experience the winter. I remember living in Oklahoma for years and the summers would get incredibly hot and the winters were incredibly cold. I remember I was 15 when I first moved to Tulsa, and I had to put on all the snow gear and go outside in the sleet and rain and snow. One time it was 15 degrees with 20 mile an hour winds, and I was just out there.. it didn't matter how much clothes I had on, everything was cold and I was getting wet, and then that was getting cold, and it was horrible. And I remember thinking why am I here? You're in a winter and you're asking yourself that question. Lord! Why am I here?

I also remember, too, that in that house that we lived in in Broken Arrow Oklahoma, behind the house, we had this big window and you could look and there was a meadow of grass, and the meadow had snow on it, and then just beyond the meadow was a forest of trees. And in the winter in Oklahoma, all those trees would lose their leaves, so they would look dead. They weren't, they were quite alive, but they would have all these branches, and then the branches, as it would rain and then freeze

and sleet and then freeze, would be covered in ice, almost an inch thick on every branch through the whole forest so that as you looked through, you would see a forest full of ice, like ice trees. It was very cool.

And I'll never forget having my first snow day! We don't have those in Southern California. And it was a Tuesday or a Monday and I really didn't want to go to school, and because it snowed I got to stay home and watch The A-Team! I grew up in the 80's, so. And I remember that moment looking out the back window and looking at the snow, and looking at the forest of ice and thinking well winter isn't all that bad.

Is winter bad or good? Is winter beautiful or ugly? Is winter easy or difficult? It's really both, isn't it. And we find that just as in nature, winter is a time of rest, of healing, though it's dangerous, difficult and painful, it's also needed, that we go through winters in our lives. Maybe you lost your job recently. Maybe you're going through a divorce. Maybe you lost a spouse or a loved one. Maybe you're going through something you never thought you'd have to face and wondering Lord, why am I here?

I want you to know that sometimes in our winters, that's when God does the most healing. That's when God does the greatest works in our lives. You might even look back at some of the other winters in your lives, and though they were horrible and painful and difficult, you might say hey if I could remove that part of your story, I will. If you want me to remove it, you'd probably say no because without those winters, I

wouldn't be the person I am today. I want you to know whatever winter you're going through, you're not going through it alone. That God is with you, I'm with you, this church is with you, and you're going to get through tougher, stronger and better than you were when you started.

Winter can be wonderful, too, can't it? I love Yosemite. People don't know this, but if you read your Bible, you'll see that Yosemite is God's favorite place on earth. It's in Thessalonians 19:52. I made that up. Yosemite is amazing and it's right here in our backyard and we go all the time. We love it. And we usually go in the summer, spring or fall, and when you go, especially in the summer, there's just people everywhere. It's gorgeous, there's deer's and bear and waterfalls. There can be waterfalls all through the valley, but then there's also a little bit of traffic and there's tents and there's people hiking around and there's trash on the ground.

And I remember that one winter, I'd never been to Yosemite in the winter, and I remember my grandpa Scott, who had passed away recently at an old healthy age. He died in his sleep, I believe. And I remember he lived in Coarsegold, which is a little town just outside of Yosemite, and I decided I'm going to go up to the valley the day before and spend the night in the valley, and then go to the funeral in the morning in Coarsegold. It snowed actually the day before I left so that when I was driving up, there was snow on the road and all through the valley. And when I got there, I actually took a picture. Check this out. Look at that.

That is half dome behind me, one of the most famous mountains. It's the symbol of Yosemite. And that is one of these famous meadows. There's just nobody there. Normally there'd be cars on that road, there'd be people in that valley, there's nobody there. Beautiful. And it was so great to walk around Yosemite all by myself.

Sometimes winters are lonely, but sometimes that's good, isn't it. Sometimes winter means snow, but there's something.. even though snow is dangerous and it's not good to drive on, there's some good things about snow, too, aren't there. When it snows, it just gets quiet outside. Have you ever noticed that? It almost dampens the sound. It makes everything seem peaceful, in a way. And let me tell you that when we go through winters in our life, very often there are moments of peace, tranquility, introspection that are needed.

Maybe you're going through your winter. Don't pass through your winter without finding the blessing that God has for you within it. There's a blessing in every winter.

When Hannah read from Psalms this morning, she was talking about a great hero, King David, who wasn't a king when he was going through the trial that she read about in Psalms. King David was an amazing man, had an amazing life that was full of difficult winters, many of which nearly killed him. King David was an interesting character and suffered a lot in his very hard life, but also had tremendous amount of victory.

It's interesting the story goes a little something like this. God called King Saul to be the king of Israel, and you watch the arc of Saul's life. He starts with all this potential and he really is a good king, at first, and then he just becomes mad and envious and covetous and greedy and murderous. And you just watch as this man with incredible potential, is good-looking, smart, chosen, anointed by God, just throws his life away.

And it's in a part of that arc that God says to the prophet Samuel, I have rejected Saul and I'm picking a new king. Go to the house of Jesse, he lives there. Samuel goes to Jesse's house and there are seven boys, all Jesse's son. And the first, the eldest that Samuel sees is a man named Eliab, and he's tall and good looking, he looks kingly, and Samuel looks at him and says 'surely this is God's anointed.' And God says to Samuel, 'don't look at his height. Don't look at his appearance. Men and women look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.' The Lord sees your heart.

And so he rejects Eliab. And then as a parade, like Jesse brings all of his sons before Samuel, one after the other, oldest to youngest, and one after another Samuel rejects them. And he says 'are there no others?' And they sort of all shuffle their feet, and they look around, and nobody wants to say anything. And they're not really sure if they should mention it, and finally someone says 'well there's David. He's the youngest and he's outside taking care of the sheep.' And Samuel says 'we will not sit down to eat until he is here.'

There's some scholarship that suggests that maybe David was actually an illegitimate son of Jesse. It doesn't say that specifically in the Bible, but there are some clues that for some reason David was an outsider among his brothers. For some reason, he wasn't invited to the meal. Even though Jesse was wealthy and had servants that could have cared for the sheep, David was forced to care for the sheep. Maybe you were like that in your family. Maybe you were somehow an outsider. Maybe sometimes in your family you felt like you didn't belong. But see God doesn't see the outside things. He sees the heart. And God has a great call for your life.

And just as Samuel called David out from his faithfulness, doing the hard work that nobody wanted to do, maybe God today is calling you out from where you are into a great anointing.

When he sees David, he looks at him and he says 'this is the Lord's anointed.' Anoints King David, and instantly David's life gets harder. We see David ascend rapidly in success. One of the big points is the story everybody knows about, the story of David and Goliath, which draws David into the court of Saul, and he begins to serve King Saul regularly, and eventually becomes a general. He becomes this great general, winning all sorts of battles, becomes famous through the land, and this is where things start to go really bad for David. He's faithful, he's loyal, he's hard working, he's a brilliant strategist, and the people begin to notice, and every time King Saul enters a town with a favorite and loyal

general David by his side, everybody begins to sing this song: 'hail King Saul who killed a thousand and David who killed ten thousand.' Every time they go into a town, Saul hears this: 'Hail King Saul who kills a thousand, and David who kills ten thousand.' And over and over, and bitterness begins to creep into Saul's heart.

And you'll see throughout the story how loyal David is to Saul, even when he's trying to kill David, but David just remains loyal. And Saul, full of madness and bitterness begins to chase David, and he flees into the wilderness.

And here's David, he's done everything right, he's been faithful, he's been moral, he's been good, he's honored. Saul, even when he thought Saul was nuts, he stood by his side. I mean everything he's done has been good, right and loyal. And here he is starving, running for his life, wondering am I truly God's anointed? Was this promise that Samuel gave me when I was a boy, was it true? Why has God abandoned me? Where are you, Lord?

It was even during that time that David spared Saul's life twice. The first, it would have been humiliating and gratifying and vindicating. Saul hearing that David is out in the wilderness somewhere, brings three thousand men with him to chase him down. And as they're out there chasing, he decides that he needs to go and relieve himself. So all the men and body guards stand outside the entrance of the cave and King Saul goes into the cave to relieve himself. Little does he know that David

and his warrior men are in there hiding, and they see Saul relieving himself on the wall! And David creeps behind and cuts a bit of his robe to prove that he could have killed him. And then Saul goes outside and David, all of his men are like kill him. Kill him. They'll make you king. They know you're better than Saul, right? Doesn't do it. He says shall I kill the Lord's anointed? And Saul goes outside. And then they're like okay, well now we need to hide, and David's like no, I need to confront this. Walks into this army of three thousand men, holding a cut robe, and says Saul! Look! I could have killed you in the most humiliating way ever and I spared your life. I am loyal to you! Why are you trying to kill me? And in this really impassioned moment, Saul looks at David and he says, is that you, David, my son? And he pleads for forgiveness and mercy, and he's embarrassed. He says why am I doing this? And it's like the next day Saul begins to hunt him down again.

David does it again. Later on in the story, goes into his camp and spares Saul's life again. He finds him sleeping, sneaks past all the men and his friend Abishai says let me take this spear and pin Saul to the floor. And David says, shall I kill the Lord's anointed? They take the spear and the water buckets, same thing, confronts Saul. Saul says oh, I'm crazy, why am I doing this to you? I'm so sorry. And then chases him again.

And if you're David and you're like I just keep doing the right thing over and over, and still I'm in this wilderness. Any of those moments,

David could have hurried to his destiny. At any of those moments, David really would have been justified in killing Saul, but he knew in his heart that was not the Lord's plan.

Maybe in your winter you're tempted to take a shortcut. You're tempted to do something that anybody watching would say that's right, he's good to do that, it's okay to do that. But in your heart, you know it's wrong. Don't do it. Listen to the Lord. Listen to the Lord. He speaks to us if we're listening. When the world says its right, but in your heart you know it's wrong, stay true to that and God will bring you to your destiny. Let God bring you to your destiny. Don't try and force your destiny. Don't try and get there sooner than you're supposed to. Don't hurry through the winter. These winters are very often good for us. And Lord knows that that wilderness experience was good for David. David wouldn't have been David without the wilderness experience. And what we don't understand is that these winter experiences in our life, they're like crucibles. David was tested and he passed the test; the harder the test, the greater the reward.

David also was able to watch a great man fall. And I think this significantly made him a better king. If only our leaders would continue to watch history, and watch people fall. And if only the leaders of our companies, and leaders of our churches, leaders of our schools would be willing to stand in the wilderness and watch great men and women fall, and recognize how ego, pride, self deception, bitterness, unforgiveness,

envy leads to so much harm. If only they would stay in the winter just a little longer, perhaps we would have stronger leaders.

I want you to know that whatever you're going through, God will get you through. Amen?

So you might say well Bobby, what am I supposed to do in this winter? You're saying I'm supposed to just be ambivalent or lazy? Here's a few things.

The first thing is when we're going through difficult times in our lives, we want to ask these questions like why is this happening to me? Or, what does this mean? These questions are natural and don't feel guilty for asking them, but they will usually only make the experience of winter worse, especially the 'what does this mean' question. Especially if you're going through health issues or something like this. I remember with our son Cohen, when something worse would happen, or something bad would happen, we would say what does this mean? What does this mean for him as an adult? Or what does this mean for his schooling? Or is he going to die? These types of questions that we ask. And I can tell you those questions don't help. In the case of Cohen, what we do is we just trust the Lord, we love him, we care for him, and believe that his best days are ahead. And that's what you do in your own life. When you face these challenges and you want to say what does this mean? Am I going to die? Don't ask those questions. Trust the Lord. Build your faith. Believe and just keep one step in front of the other.

Marcus Aurelius said “a cucumber is bitter, throw it away. There are briars in the path. Turn aside from them. This is enough. Do not add ‘and why are such things put in the world.’” There’s a lot of wisdom there.

Next, when you’re through your winter, make sure that you don’t try and hurry through whatever winter it is you’re going through. No one can hurry winter. Winter passes when winter is done. Spring will come. So will summer. But when we hurry through winter, we miss out on the gift that is within. Trust the Lord. Believe in Him.

There’s this great Russian fairy story about a silver ball on a string. There’s this boy and he’s in school, and he says oh, I hate school. It’s so long and it’s terrible. And as he’s walking into the forest, he meets a fairy. And this fairy shows up and she says I have a gift for you. It’s a little silver ball. You take this ball and you see this string? You just pull on the string. This string is your life, and as you pull on this silver string, your life will fast forward and you’ll be able to go through anything that you don’t like. And if you want it to go farther, just pull a little harder.

And so the next day he’s in school and he’s sitting through class and it started to get very boring, and the professor is speaking on oh gosh, what’s something really boring? I’m going to offend somebody. Never mind, we’ll just move on. Something boring. And so he just pulls the string, and all of a sudden he’s through his class. And oh my gosh, this is amazing. And then all of a sudden he’s going to school day after

day, and he says I wish summer vacation would come. I really want to get to summer break. So he pulls really hard and summer comes right away.

And as he faces one difficult thing after another, he pulls the string harder and harder, and all of a sudden he finds himself an old man. He skipped all these difficult things and it feels that life has passed by so quickly. And there he is old age, hunched over, weak in mind and soul, and he's walking through the forest, and he sees this fairy, the same fairy. She shows up and she says hello. Did you like the gift I gave you? And he was holding it in his hand, and he looks down at this ball and he says, I suppose it was a good gift, but it feels like my life has gone by so quickly. And the fairy says if you could ask for one wish, what would you ask for? And he says that you would have never given me this ball, and that I would have endured my suffering. And of course the story goes he becomes a young boy again, and the lesson is learned.

Many of us are that way, aren't we. When suffering comes in life, we do our best to find things to distract ourselves or hurry through or entertain ourselves or whatever. But very often the real crucible is being present in that suffering. Being there, not being somewhere else, and not hurrying. And by the way, maybe you're in a summer season in your life. Things are going great. You're making money, you're happy, your relationships are good. Life is good! You live in Southern California!

But there may be somebody in your life that's in a winter. Maybe they just lost somebody or they lost their job or they're just struggling with depression or anxiety or something. And your temptation is to say buck up, pal. Pull yourself by the shoe straps, or however the saying goes. Come on, you can do better! Be positive! This is me all the way. I do this all the time. And very often when we're going through winters in life, if you're going through a difficult time and somebody challenges you to be happy, sometimes you experience that as I don't want to be around you because you're so sad.

And when we're going through winters in our life, we need people who don't hurry us through the winter. We need people to just be with us and love us just as we are, not as we should be, and to encourage us. Because the only thing that's worse than going through winter is going through winter alone. The only thing that's worse than suffering is suffering alone. And people need to know when they're going through a hard time, that they're not a burden to you, and that they don't need to be hurried. More than anything, I want you to know if that's you, you are not alone. God will never leave you. He's by your side.

And very often, when our friends do leave us, those can be some of the moments when we experience God's presence the most. You're not alone. I'm with you. This church is with you. And the Lord is with you and you are loved.

Father, we ask in Jesus' name that you give us patience and faith in the midst of our winters, our wilderness experiences, the times when we think we're not going to make it through, you've always brought us through. Lord, we pray in those moments of doubt and fear that you would bring us faith and a fresh wind and new life. And I just pray that over everyone under the sound of my voice. In Jesus' name, Lord, break chains, and bring joy back, and bring spring, but in the midst of our winters, Lord, give us patience to trust that you're there. We love you, in Jesus' name, amen.