

THE PASTORS' PEN

articles from the elders of BBC

I recently read the autobiography of Andre Agassi, an American tennis player whose profession career spanned twenty years (1986–2006) and whose unorthodox apparel and attitude is widely credited with helping to revive the popularity of the sport by which he made his living.

Agassi's career was one of ups and downs. He first reached the World No. 1 ranking in 1995, but sank as low as World No. 141 before, against all expectations, returning to World No. 1 in 1999 and enjoying his most successful career run over the next four years.

Fans of the sport during Agassi's active career will know that there was one opponent, in particular, that plagued him.

His arch-nemesis was a fellow American by the name of Pete Sampras. The two players competed against each other 34 times, with Sampras claiming 20 wins to Agassi's 14. In

Grand Slam finals, Sampras won four times to Agassi's one.

Even in an era before widespread use of the Internet and social media, when delving deep into the lives of celebrities was perhaps not as easy as it is today, it was clear that there was professional rivalry between the two Americans. In the autobiography, Agassi acknowledges this rivalry, and remembers how he felt when Sampras announced his retirement: "Losing to Pete has caused me enormous pain, but in the long run it's also made me more resilient. If I'd beaten Pete more often, or if he'd come along in

a different generation, I'd have a better record, and I might go down as a better player, but I'd be less."

Agassi's words are insightful. He could have had an easier career and a better record if he had never encountered Sampras, but the opposition that he faced for so long actually made him a better player. Even—dare I say it?—a better person.

Agassi is hardly the paragon of Christian virtue, but his assessment of his rivalry with Sampras mirrors an important biblical insight: The adversity that Christians face make us *more*. Adversity may cause enormous pain, but in the long run it makes us more resilient. If we faced less adversity, we might enjoy greater ease and prosperity, but we'd be less.



"I'd Be Less"
(Stuart Chase)



Contrary to prosperity teaching, the Christian life offers no guarantee of ease. Jesus spoke plainly to those who would follow him: "The way is hard that leads to life"

(Matthew 7:14). It is not pleasant to lead a hard life. But while we may resent adversity, we must remember the vital role that it plays in our life.

James, under inspiration, counselled, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:2–4). The psalmist concurred: "It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes.... I know, O LORD, that your rules are righteous, and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me" (Psalm 119:71, 75).

We look forward to a time when all suffering and affliction will be a thing of the past, but until then we must live in a world of adversity. And if we are going to live in a world of adversity, it may be helpful to train ourselves to think correctly about adversity. This is a big subject, but it may be helpful to briefly consider four realities of adversity on the hard road to life.

First, we would do well to recognise that adversity wears different masks. To the Corinthians, Paul wrote of being “afflicted,” “perplexed,” “persecuted” and “struck down” (2 Corinthians 4:8-9)—four different manifestations of affliction. Peter wrote of Christians being “grieved by various trials” (1 Peter 1:6). Affliction doesn’t always look the same for every person in every situation. What may seem like a relatively minor affliction to you may well be a far greater challenge to another.

Second, we should recognise that affliction is intended by God to be faced in the context of community. God does not expect the believer to face adversity alone. “Bear one another’s burdens,” wrote Paul, “and so fulfil the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:1). God has designed the church to be the place in which we can find likeminded people who will help shoulder our burdens. The church is the place in which believers corporately tend to the wounded, encourage the downcast, and help the needy.

Third, in his kind providence, God designs affliction as a means to help us minister to others. God “comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (2 Corinthians 1:4). As you experience divine faithfulness in your own afflictions, you are meant to learn lessons about God’s faithful character that will enable you to encourage others who are afflicted. You receive grace from God in order to give grace to others.

Fourth, suffering ultimately shapes you more into the character of Christ. Life without suffering would be easier, but we’d be less. Listen again to Paul’s words to the Corinthians: “For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:17-18).

The way that leads to life is hard. It was never meant to be easy. Indeed, “the way is easy that leads to destruction” (Matthew 7:13). We don’t have to *enjoy* affliction. But without it, we’d be less.

