



THE  
MENTORING  
PROJECT

# DEALING WITH A FIERY TRIAL



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# INTRODUCTION: FIERY TRIALS

In my first congregation where I served as a minister, a woman gave birth to a baby girl that had a rare genetic condition known as tuberous sclerosis that caused multiple tumors to form on her brain. Doctors predicted that she might live. The husband fled and never returned. Years later, as the child grew (she died in her forties), her mother would always ask me on pastoral visits, “Can you tell me why this happened to me?” She didn’t ask the question in a harsh way. Honestly, it always sounded humble to me. I would reply, “No, I cannot.” And she would be content with the answer, and we would talk about other things.

She had the right to ask the question. After all, every dream of hers had been shattered. A fiery trial had come and turned her life upside down. The fact that I couldn’t provide her with an adequate answer for the exact reason was an admission that “[t]he secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law” (Deut. 29:29).

There are different kinds of trials and different degrees of intensity. But all of them are part of what we call providence: that nothing happens without God willing it to happen. Trials are never whimsical. They are ordered by the God who loves us so much that he sent his Son into the world to save sinners like us through his substitutionary death. As Christians, we must never think that trials demonstrate that God now hates us. No, that is never the case, even if the devil might make us think it. And he will.

There is always a reason for suffering, even if we cannot fully discern what that reason may be. In the end, trials come to make us cast ourselves on the mercy of God and experience his embrace. Trials grow us into maturity. They make us call upon him in prayer. They show us that without the

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Lord, we are undone.

Some trials are the result of our sin. We cannot avoid that conclusion. The broken marriage and estranged family relationships that follow sexual infidelity are the result of sin. Make no mistake about it. But some trials are mysterious. Take Job, for example. He is an example of what we might call “innocent suffering.” In fact, Job was never given an answer to the question, “why?”

My guess is, if you are now reading these words, that you do so because a trial has come into your life that you need help to understand. You need a counselor to come beside you and offer some words of wisdom. You need a friend to help you find a way to use these trials to grow you in grace. This field guide aims to do just that. It will not answer all your questions, but I hope it will help you find a peace that “surpasses all understanding” (Phil. 4:7), and enable you, through the pain, to worship — I mean, *really* worship — God.

# 1

## EVERY CHRISTIAN CAN EXPECT TRIALS

Peter, writing his first letter, warned his readers to “not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you” (1 Pet. 4:12). Evidently, he assumed that some of his readers needed to hear this. Some may have been thinking that once you are saved, life is a bed of roses! It is hard to believe that first century Christians were that naïve given the fact that Roman Emperors were openly persecuting followers of Jesus. Christians would not say, “Caesar is Lord,” which would have acknowledged that he was a god. But perhaps some Christians thought that if you kept your head down and stayed out of the public gaze, life would be trial-free. We are all capable of delusional thinking. Perhaps some early Christians thought that trials are the result of sinful behavior (and, of course, sometimes they are). The remedy, then, is to live a godly life and stay out of trouble.

Some of the very last words Jesus spoke directly to his disciples consisted of a warning about trouble: “In the world you will have tribulation” (John 16:33). But these were spoken to the disciples, the twelve who were in the front lines of the warfare. Perhaps that means “ordinary” Christians can expect a life free of trials.

Wrong!

It is interesting that early in the ministry of the Apostle Paul, following his first missionary journey, he seems to have learned a life lesson: “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). The context of this statement is in a place called Derbe. He had been stoned and left for dead in Lystra. But he had recovered and gone back into the city for the evening, and the next day he went on to Derbe where he “made many disciples” (Acts 14:21). It is to these young disciples that Paul warns of “many tribulations.” Every Christian must prepare for trouble.

In addition to passages that we have already looked at, consider the following:

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“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds” (James 1:2).

“Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all” (Ps. 34:19).

“Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12).

Every Christian can expect to encounter trials. But the Bible also tells us that we may experience more than one kind of trial. Peter writes about “*various* trials” (1 Pet. 1:6, emphasis added). And James gives advice to his brothers whenever they “meet trials of *various* kinds” (James 1:2, emphasis added). Both apostles use the same Greek word, translated “various.” It would be the word one might use to describe a multi-colored garment.

Trials come in different shapes and sizes. There are physical trials. Think of cancer, neuropathy, blindness, or just the aches and pains of growing old. There are also psychological trials. Think of agoraphobia, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Then there are spiritual trials, the loss of assurance, for example, or seasons when Satan has you in his cross-hairs (what Paul has in mind when he talks about an “evil day” [Eph. 6:13]).

Not only should we expect different *kinds* of trials, the trials we face may vary *in degree*. Both Stephen and James (John’s brother and one of The Twelve) were killed in the early days of the church (Acts 7:60; 12:2). Others, like Daniel in the lion’s den, will face a similar threat but escape the trial unscathed (Dan. 6:16–23). Some may experience one or two major trials in their lives, and others may endure constant, unrelenting trials.

God knows what we can endure, and the Bible makes a promise that he knows our breaking point: “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it” (1 Cor. 10:13).

### **Why Are Trials Necessary?**

Why is it necessary that Christians experience trials? There are many answers, and some are known only to the mind of God. Let me suggest seven:

- I. Satan exists. It is difficult to imagine just how cruel and spiteful he is. He hates everything that God does, including those whom God redeems and calls his children. Paul gives us a clear warning in Ephesians 6: “For

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we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12).

- II. We live in a fallen world. We are not in Eden. Though we are promised heaven when we die, that reality is not yet ours. Evil is all around us and often within us. The world groans because it is not what it is meant to be: “For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now” (Rom. 8:22). The trial we experience is the result of living in a world that is out of sorts.
- III. There is evil in the world, but there is also evil within our hearts. As Christians, we live, as theologians sometimes put it, in the tension between the *now* and the *not yet*. We are redeemed. We are the children of God. When Paul writes to the Colossian believers, he calls them “saints” (literally, “holy ones,” [Col. 1:2]). But we are not yet in heaven. We have new hearts and new wills and new affections, but we are not yet free from all corruption. Paul expresses the tension this way: “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing” (Rom. 7:19). Sin no longer governs us, but it has not yet fully disappeared. Because we are still in the *not yet*, trials come upon us.
- IV. The Bible makes it clear that trials produce good fruit. Paul puts it this way: “we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom. 5:3–5). Being forced to deal with a trial produces perseverance or endurance. Those who have been closeted and pampered are unlikely to have the resources to stick at it when things get rough. There is nothing inside them to enable them to keep going. Endurance, Paul says, produces *character*. He is thinking of the quality of having been tested and survived. God isn’t interested in producing something that will not last. To produce the right result may take many blows. Then Paul adds that the ultimate goal of trials is to produce hope — the hope of glory. James says a similar thing in the opening chapter of his letter: “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 1:3–4).
- V. Trials (should) make us cry out to God in prayer. The reason for trials can be the providence of God to make us feel how much more dependent upon his grace we should be. In our weakness, we are forced to



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cry out to him. When Paul experienced the thorn in his flesh, his instinct was to ask that it be taken away. But that did not happen. Instead, God allowed it to remain, adding, “[m]y grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). Like Jacob, Paul was forced to limp as he walked the narrow road that leads to eternal life, knowing that with every step, the Lord was beside him.

- VI. Some trials are the disciplining hand of God. Sometimes, trials are the result of our sinful behavior. Trials like these are designed to wake us up to the reality of our condition, our need to repent of some sinful behavior and seek the Lord with all our strength. The author of Hebrews suggests that such discipline is evidence that we are God’s adopted children: “If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Heb. 12:8–11).
- VII. Paul makes it clear the fiery trial is God’s way of making us more like Jesus. Trials provoke us to godly responses. Not always, of course. We can always be stubborn and react to them with disdain and cynicism. But if we submit to trials, great good may emerge from the darkness. This is what Paul says: “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom. 5:1–5).

What is interesting about this passage is that suffering is mentioned immediately following a statement of how we can be justified before God. It seems that he wants us to know that justified Christians, who have been made right with God through faith alone in Christ alone, apart from the works of the law, *will suffer in some way*. Having stated that a result of justification is a foretaste of the glory of God, he brings us down sharply to the reality that we are still in this world, and we still have a great deal of remaining sin to deal with.

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*Endurance.* Suffering produces (in the godly who respond with submission to the providence of God) endurance, or *stickability*. Those who have not faced trials have spiritual muscles that are flabby and weak. Trials produce the kind of stamina that enables the believer to keep going.

*Character.* Endurance produces character. That's true at the most obvious level. People who have been through difficulties often have a spiritual toughness to them. It is the character of having been tested and emerging stronger for it. Something that has been tested and tried demonstrates that it is *genuine*. A craftsman puts it to the test. He wants it to last. He isn't interested in producing cheap imitations, but the real thing, something that will endure. God wants to build something — *someone* — that will last forever.

*Hope.* Hope of the glory of God. Everything that God does in our lives is a sign that what he has already begun to do in you, he will consummate in glory. If he didn't intend to reshape you, he would leave you alone. Think of Job 23:10: "When he has tried me, I shall come out as gold."

Trials make us more like Jesus. Suffering can destroy. Or it can transform. It only does that when we see that God has a different set of priorities than ours. He is interested in the long term and lasting, not the short term.

And sometimes, the reason for a particular trial is known only to God. Not all suffering is chastisement. The Bible recognizes "innocent suffering." We shall speak to this later, but the book of Job provides an example of devastating trials in the life of one of the godliest men that ever lived. Not every providence can be dissected and analyzed. There is a mystery to the hand of God in our lives. Sometimes the answer to the question, "Why?" is simply, "I don't know." But even if the answer eludes us, God's love in Christ is always sure and certain.

### **Discussion & Reflection:**

1. Did any of the reasons given above surprise or challenge you?
2. Do they shed new light on difficulties you've faced?

# 2

## CASE STUDIES

To better understand the cause of trials, we will take three examples found in Scripture: Joseph, Job, and Paul.

### ***Joseph***

The story of Joseph's suffering is recounted in detail in Genesis 37, 39–50. Almost a quarter of the book of Genesis is devoted to him. It begins when Joseph is seventeen. His father Jacob made it clear that he liked Joseph more than his brothers, making for him “a robe of many colors” (Gen. 37:3). And when Joseph's brothers saw their father's preference for Joseph, they “hated him and could not speak peacefully to him” (Gen. 37:4). When Joseph begins having dreams in which he rises to greatness above his father and brothers, they become jealous of him.

One day, when the brothers were tending sheep in a distant place, Jacob sent Joseph to inquire after them, but when he arrived, the brothers conspired to kill him. Rather than put him to death, they sell him as a slave to a band of Midianites, and Joseph finds himself in the house of Potiphar, Pharaoh's “captain of the guard” (Gen. 37:36).

God's hand was upon Joseph the entire time: “The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man” (Gen. 39:2). Potiphar made Joseph “overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had” (Gen. 39:4). But trials followed when Joseph refused the sexual advances of Potiphar's wife and was sent to prison.

Joseph exercises his ability to interpret dreams when the Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker find themselves in the same prison. Later, when the cupbearer is restored to the palace (the baker having been executed), Pharaoh has a dream and asks if anyone can help interpret it. Suddenly, the cupbearer remembers Joseph has this ability, and he is brought into the presence of the Pharaoh.

Then the story continues to unfold. Joseph finds himself in the favor of the Egyptian Pharaoh and becomes the second most powerful person in Egypt, in charge of the grain supplies during a seven-year long period of

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plenty and a seven-year long period of famine.

Jacob, who had been shown Joseph's blood-stained robe, had believed the brothers' narrative that the boy was dead. Years later, when Jacob sends his sons to Egypt to buy grain, Joseph eventually reveals himself to them and later to Jacob. In a defining moment, Joseph tells his brothers: "you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20).

The narrative never suggests that Joseph's trials were the result of his own actions. Clearly, Joseph's brothers are at fault in their jealousy and rage over their father's favoritism. And Jacob is at fault for showing more favor to Joseph than to his other sons. But Genesis 50:20 suggests something more complex. There is a sense in which Joseph's brothers are to blame, and there is also another sense in which the cause of Joseph's trials lies in the hand of God. God overrules, superintends, and orders providence to occur in such a manner that Joseph experiences pain and suffering because of the sinful behavior of his brothers, but God is not *the author* of the sin that caused Joseph's pain. God is sovereign and creates the circumstances in which sin is possible, but he is not the one who creates the sin.

This last sentence is difficult to understand. Perhaps we may illustrate it this way: A person may write a novel in which a murder takes place, but he is not the one who committed the murder. Similarly, God rules in such a manner that nothing happens without him willing it to happen, but he is not the one who commits the sin that results in pain. He permits the sin to occur, but he is not the author of it.

The life of Joseph illustrates the way in which God may permit trials to occur through the sinful actions of others for a reason. And that reason, in Joseph's case, was to ensure the survival of the line of Jacob and the covenant promises that God had given his grandfather, Abraham. Had Joseph not been tried, the line of Abraham would have ceased, and the promise of redemption forfeited. Joseph is an example of a trial that has a very discernible reason. But these reasons are only discernible *after the fact*. They were not discernible when Joseph was in prison. As the puritan John Flavel wrote, "The providence of God is like Hebrew words—it can be read only backwards."

However, sometimes the reason for suffering cannot be explained to our satisfaction. Such is the case with Job.

### **Job**

The prophet Ezekiel mentions Job along with Daniel and Noah as examples of godly men, suggesting that Job was an historical person rather

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than a mere literary figure. Like the Hebrew patriarchs, Job lived more than 100 years (Job 42:16). The mention of raiding Sabeans and Chaldean tribes suggests that Job lived during the second millennium, perhaps during the time of Abraham or Moses.

The book of Job begins with a prologue that tells us of Job's wife (Job 2:9) and ten children (seven sons and three daughters [Job 1:2]). We also learn of his godliness, which is mentioned three times, once by the author (Job 1:1), and twice by God himself (Job 1:8; 2:3): "there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil" (Job 2:3). Acting as a priest to his children, Job fears that birthday celebrations might require a burnt offering for each of his children (Job 1:4–5).

Two accounts of immense trials are recorded in the first chapter: the first when raiding parties of Sabeans (Job 1:15) and Chaldeans (Job 1:17) robbed him of his livestock (i.e., his wealth) and a "great wind" killed his ten children (Job 1:19). Job's immediate response is one of faith: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21).

In Chapter 2, yet another trial befalls Job when he is struck by a deadly disease described as "loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head" (Job 2:7). When his wife tells him to "[c]urse God and die" (Job 2:9) — a counsel of unbelief and folly — Job again responds with faith: "Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?" (Job 2:10). The author makes it clear that the cause of Job's trials did not lie in any sin of Job's: "In all this Job did not sin with his lips" (Job 2:10).

What Job does not know, and what we are privately told, is that behind these earthly trials lies a cosmic battle between good and evil, God and Satan (Job 1:6–9, 12; 2:1–4, 6–7). Satan wagers that the only reason for Job's godliness is that he has not endured suffering. Satan tells God that if Job were to be put to the test through trial, Job would lose his faith and "curse you to your face" (Job 1:11; 2:5).

From one point of view, the cause of Job's suffering is Satan. But the author of the book of Job wants us to see that this, while true, is not the only cause. Difficult as it is to understand, the author wishes us to grasp that the fundamental reason for Job's suffering lies in the sovereignty of God. On a day when angels give an account of themselves, Satan is also called to account for himself (Job 1:6; 2:1). And it is God, not Satan, who suggests that Job become Satan's target: "Have you considered my servant Job[?]" (Job 1:8; 2:3). We are not given an explanation as to how God is totally

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sovereign and not the author of sin, though that moral issue lies over the entire book.

Following an initial response of faith, we are introduced to Job's three "friends": Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite (Job 2:11). Before they issue their counsel, Job descends into a pit of despair, wishing that he had never been born — dark words that Jeremiah repeats following his own trial (Job 3:1–26; Jer. 20:7–18).

Job's friends have only one counsel: that the root cause of Job's suffering lies in his own sin, of which he needs to repent. It can be summarized in the opening words of Eliphaz said to be given him by some secret source:

Can mortal man be in the right before God?  
Can a man be pure before his Maker?  
Even in his servants he puts no trust,  
and his angels he charges with error;  
how much more those who dwell in houses of clay,  
whose foundation is in the dust,  
who are crushed like the moth. (Job 4:17–19)

In other words, suffering is the result of God's punishment for our sins. It is instant retribution for wrongdoing.

Later in the book, we encounter another friend, Elihu son of Barakel the Buzite, who "burned with anger at Job because he justified himself rather than God" (Job 32:2). Commentators differ as to whether Elihu adds anything or merely repeats the instant retribution narrative of Job's three friends. It does appear that initially, at least, Elihu suggests that Job can learn something about himself through suffering that otherwise he might not know, but it also seems that as he goes on, he falls into the instant retribution explanation.

Three times Job speaks of one who understands his innocence, an "arbiter," a "witness," and, famously (though often incorrectly interpreted), a "Redeemer" (Job 9:33; 16:19; 19:25). In each case, Job is not looking for someone to forgive him but someone who will uphold the rightness of his case (as one who is innocent). It is not that Job is sinless; it is rather that sin is not the cause of suffering as his friends (and Elihu) insisted.

Job was not privy to the voice of God in the opening two chapters, and it is only in Chapter 38 that God summons Job to account for himself. Job has been using "words without knowledge" (Job 38:2). Rather than Job

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ask the questions and God provide the answers, God turns the tables and asks upwards of sixty questions, none of which Job can answer. At a telling moment, God asks: “Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it” (Job 40:2). At which point, Job lays his hand over his mouth. However, God is not finished, and more questions follow. At one point, God mentions a land creature, “Behemoth” (Job 40:15), and a sea creature, “Leviathan” (Job 41:1). Commentators differ, but a good case can be made that these are poetic descriptions of an elephant and a crocodile. Why did God create them? The answer is at one level, “I do not know.” And the problem of pain is like that. Why does one suffer and another not? We do not know. But there is another answer, one that Job accedes to:

I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,  
but now my eye sees you;  
therefore I despise myself,  
and repent in dust and ashes. (Job 42:5–6)

It is not important that Job understand the *cause* of his suffering — it lies in the unfathomable and mysterious purposes of God. It is only necessary that Job trust him as he initially had.

The book of Job ends with an account of Job’s prayer for his three friends (Job 42:8). Nothing is said of Elihu. We are also told that his brothers and sisters consoled him (Job 42:11), that Job’s wealth was restored (Job 42:12), and that he had ten more children, seven sons and three daughters (Job 42:13), and that he lived to be 140 years old (Job 42:16).

Job is an example of *innocent* suffering. The reason for Job’s suffering had nothing to do with Job’s sinfulness. We may lay the blame at the feet of Satan, but that does not fully explain the cause. It was God who brought Job to Satan’s attention. Why? We are not told. Neither was Job. He must live by faith that the reason is known only to the mind of God.

### **Paul**

Paul suffered in multiple ways, but he drew specific attention to a trial he labeled as a “thorn...in the flesh” (2 Cor. 12:7). It followed an experience of the “third heaven” (2 Cor. 12:2) or “paradise” (2 Cor. 12:3). Rather than draw attention to himself, he uses the third person, “I know a man” (2 Cor. 12:2). In addition, Paul was in no hurry to speak about it since this experience had taken place “fourteen years ago” (2 Cor. 12:2). Corinthian super-apostles were fond of exalting themselves, but not the Apostle Paul (2 Cor. 11:5). Nor does he tell us what he saw or heard, though it must have been breathtaking.

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What Paul does tell us is that such an experience could easily have become a matter of pride. He could easily have exalted his status over others: “So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited” (2 Cor. 12:7). Privilege may lead to pride.

As with Job, the cause of the trial, at one level, is Satan. But Satan cannot do anything without divine permission. God is always in control even when bad things happen to his people. Satan has no authority to act outside of God’s providential control.

But what was the nature of the trial? What was the “thorn”? We are not told. It may have been a spiritual trial whereby one or more of Paul’s besetting sins flared up. Some have conjectured, given Paul’s statement about having written to the Galatians in “large letters,” that it may have been something to do with his eyesight (Gal. 6:11). But we do not know because Paul does not tell us. He wished us to learn lessons that are applicable whatever the nature of the trial.

One of the lessons that this account teaches us is that trials may be difficult to bear and difficult to accept. Paul’s immediate instinct is to pray that God take it away. Three times (perhaps three seasons), Paul took the matter to the Lord and asked that the trial cease. His immediate response was not acquiescence and submission. Far too much difficulty has been caused by teaching Christians that one should immediately submit to a trial. Some have insisted that the mark of godliness and maturity is to immediately submit to a trial. Even Jesus, in the hour of his trial, asked that the cup of God’s wrath be taken from him, “if it be possible” (Matt. 26:39). True, he went on to say, “nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will,” but it would be a grave mistake to emphasize the latter at the expense of the former. The trial Jesus was about to face was so intense and foreboding that his human instinct was to ask for it to be removed. Nowhere should such an instinct be viewed as cowardice. Nobody, in his right mind, wishes to experience pain and suffering.

Paul experienced the grace of submission only through struggle and prayer. And that will be true for us, too.

Some prayers are not answered in the way we may desire. Prayers are always answered and sometimes the answer is “no!” That Paul took three seasons of prayer to ask for the trial to be taken away tells us that this may have lasted a considerable amount of time before the apostle heard the



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Lord say to him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). The fact Paul was not told the reason for his trial does not mean that there wasn’t one. There is always a reason for suffering, even if we may not be able to discern it. Providence always has a purpose, and in the end, it is to glorify God. The distribution of pain is not whimsical, nor is it a matter of mere sovereignty, “For he doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men” (Lam. 3:33, KJV). On an English house in Watergate Street, Chester, there is an inscription dated as 1652, “Providence is My Inheritance.” What I get each day is the providence of God, including the trials.

Paul was in danger of spiritual pride and got brought low. It is on our knees, abased before God, that we will find strength. God had work for Paul to do. He would go on to plant churches and write a quarter of the New Testament, but fourteen years before any of this would occur, God taught the apostle a painful lesson by sending “a messenger of Satan” to place a thorn in his side.

Paul learned the grace of God is sufficient in every trial. It is the grace of *power* in the face of human weakness. It is the power of the one who multiplied loaves and fishes, walked on water, and raised the dead. It is the power of the one that casts out demons. And what are the requirements necessary to experience this powerful grace? Acknowledged weakness and felt need. And once this spiritual strength is experienced, we can, with the apostle, say, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:9–10).

### ***Discussion & Reflection:***

1. What aspect of Joseph’s, Job’s, and Paul’s story is most instructive for you?
2. Are there any other biblical figures — or even people you know — whose suffering you could use as a “case study”?

# 3

## HOW NOT TO RESPOND

There are responses to trials that are wrong. Allow me to mention three.

### ***Despair***

First is the response of *despair*. It is the loss of all hope. Circumstances may rob us of all comfort and suggest that there is no way out. Christians may forget God's promises and wallow in self-pity and despair. Paul told the Corinthians, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair" (2 Cor. 4:8). Psalm 43:5 provides a model on how to address despair:

Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
and why are you in turmoil within me?  
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,  
my salvation and my God.

The Psalms are always realistic about what to expect in life. They never sugar-coat our expectations. Singing them in public worship brings a level-headedness that other songs do not. As one author asked, "What do miserable Christians sing?" Because the fact is, we often find ourselves overwhelmed by life's fiery trials. And our worship, in private or in public, should reflect that truth. Worship that doesn't contain the harsh realities of the Psalms will always be superficial and even unrealistic.

Take, for example, Psalm 6. It is, at one level, a psalm of great despair. Take a moment to read it carefully:

O Lord, rebuke me not in your anger,  
nor discipline me in your wrath.  
Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing;  
heal me, O Lord, for my bones are troubled.  
My soul also is greatly troubled.  
But you, O Lord—how long?

Turn, O Lord, deliver my life;  
save me for the sake of your steadfast love.  
For in death there is no remembrance of you;

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in Sheol who will give you praise?

I am weary with my moaning;  
every night I flood my bed with tears;  
I drench my couch with my weeping.  
My eye wastes away because of grief;  
it grows weak because of all my foes.

Depart from me, all you workers of evil,  
for the Lord has heard the sound of my weeping.  
The Lord has heard my plea;  
the Lord accepts my prayer.  
All my enemies shall be ashamed and greatly troubled;  
they shall turn back and be put to shame in a moment.

We cannot expound all of it here, but notice the extent of the Psalmist's despair: he thinks he is about to enter Sheol, the place of the dead. His eyes are wasting away with grief. Workers of evil (enemies) surround him. As is often the case with the Psalms, the moment of greatest tension occurs in the middle of the psalm:

I am weary with my moaning;  
every night I flood my bed with tears;  
I drench my couch with my weeping. (Ps. 6:6)

That's despair, for sure! But note, too, the way out of despair. He prays, even in his despair: "Be gracious to me...heal me...turn O Lord, deliver my life...save me." This is the prayer of a man who knows that God has not abandoned him, that whatever the reason for the trial (and we are not told), God is the same God. In the darkness and gloom, Christians must say with the Psalmist: "The Lord has heard my plea; the Lord accepts my prayer" (Ps. 6:9).

And what precisely does the psalmist lay hold of in his cries to the Lord? God's "steadfast love" (Ps. 6:4). This is the Hebrew word, *hesed*. It occurs almost 250 times in the Old Testament. William Tyndale, the English Reformer who translated the Hebrew Bible into English, chose to translate this Hebrew word as "loving kindness."

The loving kindness, or steadfast love, of God is related to his covenant, his promise to his people in which he said, "I will be your God, and you shall be my people" (e.g. Gen. 17:7; Exod. 6:7; Ezek. 34:24; 36:28). There is a covenant bond between the Lord and those who are his that cannot be broken. And even when despair threatens, it is this bond that dispels the despair and brings light and hope.

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### ***Stoicism***

Second, the believer should stay clear of *Stoicism*.

Stoicism has been around from the times of the Greeks and Romans. One infamous Roman Emperor's writings, Marcus Aurelius, who reigned in the third century AD, are still studied today. But Stoicism goes further back, having its roots in the ancient Agora of Athens by Zeno of Citium around 300 BC. And Paul encountered them at the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17).

We need not get into the technicalities of Stoicism, but its basis point is what we euphemistically refer to as the "stiff upper lip" approach to suffering. Its counsel in the face of trial is detachment, even denial. In this sense, evil, pain, and suffering are illusions. By believing that they are real and focusing upon them, they become real. Virtue is what counts; it is the only good. Everything must act toward virtue. The wise person is the one most free from their passions. We have no control over events that occur to us. It is up to us to choose how we respond. We must not let them bother us. We must not be entangled in emotional responses. Nothing should get us down in the dumps. And the last thing we should do is ask why these are happening. Almost every psalm in the canon of Scripture is condemned by the philosophy of Stoicism.

There is, of course, much more to Stoicism, but in its crass form, it is a denial of the passions that are a part of the human psyche. Stoicism, for example, would condemn Jesus' tears at hearing of the death of his friend Lazarus, or his mental pain in Gethsemane when he sweated "great drops of blood falling down to the ground" (Luke 22:44). True, our emotions must be self-controlled, but they are not to be denied and suppressed altogether. We have the right to ask, as Job did, why suffering comes our way, even if God does not provide the answer.

Stoicism finds its strength from within. It is a religion of human effort and will-power. Christianity is different. Paul, for example, speaks of finding contentment in every circumstance:

I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Phil. 4:11–13)

Notice two things about what Paul says in this passage. First, Paul found the ability to be content in the face of trial through much struggle. "I have learned," he says. He wants us to understand that it did not come easily. Second, the source of his contentment was not something within himself, but in "him [God]"

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who strengthens me.” The ability to be calm in the face of trouble comes from the inner working of the Holy Spirit, reminding us of God’s promises, and assuring us of Christ’s victory over sin and the devil. When Paul says, “I can do all things,” he is not boasting of his control over his feelings and strength of character. His ability to “do all things” is the result of the power of God at work in him. As John MacArthur puts it in his commentary, “Because believers are in Christ (Gal. 2:20), he infuses them with His strength to sustain them.”

### ***Bitterness***

A third response that is wrong is *bitterness*. I have known Christians to harbor bitterness because of events that happened to them in the past. It changed their lives and destroyed their ambitions and dreams. And instead of responding biblically, they allowed “the root of bitterness” to grow in their hearts (Heb. 12:15). Decades later, they are still angry and sore about the events that occurred (or did not occur when they wished they had).

The phrase, “the root of bitterness,” seems to be an allusion to something Moses says when reviewing the covenant between God and Israel: “Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit” (Deut. 29:18). Moses had in mind the poisonous effect of a plant whose roots are bitter and can cause sickness and death. The author of Hebrews, addressing the whole church, warns that such poison is always present, and we are to be vigilant in making sure that we avoid ingesting it.

In rebuking Simon the Sorcerer, Paul said to him, “For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity” (Acts 8:23). This is an extreme case of bitterness, where the poison had been present for some time and had changed this man into a dangerous sorcerer.

Bitterness, unresolved anger with God for allowing trials to wreck our ambitions, must be starved to the point of death: “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice,” Paul told the Ephesians (Eph. 4:31). Bitterness is distrust in God’s providence. It is to believe the devil’s lie in the Garden of Eden that God’s word cannot be trusted. This is not Christianity. It is idolatry of the worst sort.

### ***Discussion & Reflection:***

1. Do any of these resonate with you? Have you responded with despair, Stoicism, or bitterness to something in your life?
2. How do the Psalms help us respond in a more God-honoring and faithful manner?

# 4

## WHAT SHOULD CHRISTIANS DO WHEN THE FIERY TRIAL COMES?

It is time to address the positive and ask what we *should* do in the face of the fiery trial. Allow me to offer ten suggestions.

- I. Be realistic.* Expect the fiery trial to come. Don't be shocked if bad things happen to you. Jesus made it very clear in the Upper Room. Speaking to his disciples, who were now to face life without his physical presence, he said, "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). These fiery trials may be mental, emotional, or physical. They may be real, and sometimes they are, as we say, "in the mind," but no less real to us. Why should you or I be exempted?

To be forewarned is to be forearmed, they say. But that is not always the case. Unbelief may blind us to the warnings Jesus gives. Self-pity can make us turn in upon ourselves and allow doubt and anger to fester.

- II. Be careful what you ask for!* What is your greatest desire? Is it, as it should be, to be sanctified fully and completely — as much as that is possible in this world? How do you think this will come about? Will God place you on a bed of ease and float you above the fray? You know that's not the case!

Our holiness can only come about as we engage in a war with the world, the flesh, and the devil. And war means pain and suffering. If we pray, as Robert Murray McCheyne once did, saying, "Lord, make me as holy as a pardoned sinner can be made," then we are asking for trouble! If we are content with our current state of sanctification,

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then you might not experience trials (though this is likely to overrule that half-hearted response). But if holiness is what we desire, then mortification of sins must be a part of it, and killing sin is always going to be painful.

- III. *Recognize the providence of God.* We are talking about the doctrine of providence. At every step of the way, the sovereign Lord is there, ordering and governing, bringing about his purposes. In the darkness, you need only stretch out your hand, and he will embrace it. If you fall into a ravine, his arms will be there to catch you. The doctrine of providence will help you sleep at night. It is the world of Romans 8:28: “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” Inside this panoply of providence, there is peace and contentment. Outside of it, there is only confusion, blaring voices, and the smell of chaos and death.
- IV. *Embrace the fire.* Paul, in addressing the trials that he faced, was not content with merely acceptance and submission. He told his readers that he rejoiced in them! “We rejoice in our sufferings,” he said (Rom. 5:3). And he expected his readers to do the same. As we have seen already, when we cited this verse, Paul made it clear that the reason he rejoiced is that suffering produces holiness — endurance, character, hope that assures us of glory to come. James said the same thing right at the outset of his letter: “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds” (James 1:2). It is as though James was bursting to say something that every Christian needs to hear. And only Christians can really hear this message. Because Christians know that suffering has a purpose in the plan of God for lives. It shapes us into the image of Christ and makes us long for heaven and glory. Christians know that this world is temporary, and they are simply passing through it to set foot in the Celestial City. The fiery trial is temporary. The glory to come is eternal.
- V. *Pray without ceasing.* Some trials will endure throughout our journey through this world. Some trials are temporary, but others endure. Prayers that they be taken away seem ineffective. Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” brought about three seasons of prayer that the Lord might remove it. But that was not God’s plan. He allowed it to remain to remind the apostle to stay humble after he had seen things and heard things that he was not permitted to disclose. These had the potential of arousing pride, and to ensure that they did not, God brought him low (2 Cor. 12:1–10).

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It is, of course, right to pray for healing in the face of sickness. Initially, there is the hope that God, in his providence, may heal and restore. But sometimes, it becomes clear that this is not God's intention. And prayers for strength and grace to endure the trial to the very end will be necessary. It is not always easy to discern at what point that change in the direction of prayer should be made. Each case will be different, and wisdom will need to be sought.

- VI. *Accept the limits of your knowledge.* Some trials come to those who are innocent. This needs a little explanation. No one is innocent in one sense. We are all guilty of Adam's sin: "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned" (Rom. 5:12). All who descend from Adam sinned in him because he was established as our representative head. All mankind is reckoned guilty in him. But consider the case of the man Jesus met who had been blind from birth (John 9:1). The disciples asked, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). And Jesus answered, saying, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him" (John 9:3). Jesus wasn't suggesting that this man was somehow free of Adam's sin. What Jesus was saying was that his blindness was not the result of God's judgment because of his or his parents' *particular* sin. This is a case of *innocent* suffering. It is like the case of Job we considered earlier.

Jesus makes a very interesting comment about this blind man's condition. The disciples wanted an answer to the question, "why was he suffering?" And their only recourse was to suggest he or his parents were being punished for some past sin. But Jesus tells them otherwise, adding the reason for his suffering was that "the works of God might be displayed in him" (John 9:3). Jesus healed the man and thereby demonstrated his lordship over the powers of darkness. The reason for this man's trial was to display Jesus' power to the disciples and to us who read the story.

It is possible that some of our trials are sent to demonstrate the power of the Holy Spirit at work in those who are tried, enabling us to go forward in strength and faith and become a witness to the resurrection power of Jesus Christ.

- VII. *See the good.* Trials strengthen faith and promote the fruits of the Spirit. It is the lesson of passages like Romans 5:3–5 that we consid-



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ered earlier. But it is also the message of other passages. James, as we have seen, addresses the issue at the beginning of his epistle: “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). Trials, when handled biblically, make us “perfect and complete.” Of course, that perfection and completeness cannot be experienced in this world. James is thinking of how trials urge us on the narrow way that leads to eternal life. The author of Hebrews says the same thing: “For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Heb. 12:10–11).

VIII. *Read your trials in reverse.* At the time of suffering, things may make little sense. We cannot see the wood for the trees. We need to rise above it, like getting into an airplane and rising to 35,000 feet. Then we look backwards and forwards. We can see the path from which we may have strayed and God’s hand to getting us back to it again. When we find ourselves unable to answer the question as to why these trials have come, we are to trust him, knowing that he will never leave us nor forsake us (Deut. 31:8; Heb. 13:5).

IX. *Always remember that in your pocket there is a key called Promise.* In a time of severe testing, when the darkness was so great I feared that God had abandoned me, three friends gathered around and brought me a gift. It was a hand-made plague, the size of an average book, on which were inscribed these words: “A Key called Promise.”

In Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Christian and Hopeful stray from the path and are caught by Giant Despair who puts them in a deep dungeon in Doubting Castle. Quickly, they sink into despondency and see no way out, until Christian remembers that he has a key in his pocket called *Promise*. Using the key, Christian and Hopeful were able to unlock the doors of their prison and escape to return to the narrow way.

Consider the following two promises and read them over and over:

Fear not, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.  
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

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and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you.

For I am the Lord your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. (Isa. 43:1–3)

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;  
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:31–38)

- X. *Remember, this world is not your home.* When Peter addresses the fiery trial in 1 Peter 4:12–16, he makes several interesting and important observations. First, we should not think of trials as “something strange” (v. 12). His point is that every Christian can expect to suffer. Second, when Christians suffer, they share Christ's sufferings” (v. 13). Peter does not mean that our sufferings contribute to the atonement. That can never be true. What Peter means is that we are in union with Christ and our sufferings are also his sufferings. In Acts 7, when men, at Saul's request, took up stones to kill Stephen, Jesus called out to Saul saying, “Why do you persecute me?” They were persecuting one of Jesus' lambs, and, in effect, they were stoning *him*. We can never enter into the sufferings Christ endured, but he can enter into ours. The book of Hebrews speaks of how Jesus sympathizes with us in our sufferings (Heb. 4:15). Third, Peter tells us we suffer *because we are Christians*; we should feel ourselves blessed because the Spirit of glory “rests upon you” (1 Pet. 4:14). There is the possibility that we suffer because of sin on our part, Peter says (1 Pet. 4:15), but when suffering comes for no fault of our own, we should meditate on the glory that is to come.

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Heaven is our home. And, ultimately, the new heavens and new earth will come (Isa. 65:17; 66:22; 2 Pet. 3:13). The fiery trial is temporary. Our new abode in the age to come is forever. In that phase of our existence, there will be no trial of any kind: “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21:4).

So press on until the New Jerusalem comes into view.

### ***Discussion & Reflection:***

1. Do any of the above strike you as particularly difficult?
2. Which of the above pieces of counsel can you adopt to help you get through a current trial?



## CONCLUSION

Every Christian can expect to experience various kinds of trials during their pilgrimage to heaven. Christians live in a fallen world, and Satan “prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8). In addition, Christians are not yet fully sanctified. There is a war within us that the Apostle Paul summarizes this way: “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me” (Rom. 7:19–20). Trials sometimes are the result of our ungodly responses. But sometimes, trials may come through no fault of our own, as Job experienced.

In every trial, we may rest assured that God is in control and that he will always help us overcome the trial and respond with grace and courage, learning through the trial to grow. Trials, by the help of the Holy Spirit, can bring forth the fruit of the Spirit and make us more like Jesus.

Christians can take heart from the words of Job: “when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold” (Job 23:10b; cf. James 1:12; 1 Pet. 1:7).



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