

only when things go smoothly? This is one of the most basic struggles of the Christian life: What comes out of our hearts when the good times fade, and the crunch comes?

Job’s Catastrophe (1:13-19)—Verse 12 teaches that Satan can do nothing without God drawing the boundary lines. Satan at this point is allowed to touch Job’s belongings, but not his body. There is no dualism here, where God and Satan are viewed as equals, competing for the allegiance of peoples’ hearts. Satan is absolutely subservient to God’s purposes. He can do nothing without God’s permission.

We can read the narrative of verses 13-19 easily enough, but we can scarcely identify with the inner agony of soul that suddenly was Job’s portion. His loss was complete. His anguish was intensified in that while one tragedy was being reported, another person would come bearing news of further loss, culminating in the death of his sons and daughters. God’s hand can certainly be heavy upon his servants. But in this case, it must be emphasized, adverse providence had nothing to do with sins Job had committed. It was an intense trial designed to bring out what Job was really made of—and it did.

Job’s Confession (1:20-22)—God’s grace is sufficient to keep his people from drowning in the floods that surround them. Job did not react to his extensive losses like an emotionless stoic. He rather humbled himself in the dust and—wonder of wonders—had a solo worship service! He “worshipped.” He does not focus on his personal losses, but on his personal God. What fell from his lips at a moment when most of us would have collapsed in utter despair is most instructive.

He makes a confession about himself as a creature—“Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither.” He knew that in light of this, he had no inherent claims or “rights.” “Naked” he came into the world, and “naked” he would leave it.

He makes a confession about God’s sovereignty—“The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away.” Job recognized that all he ever had came from God. He could not, therefore, complain or gripe if his possessions were removed from him by the original Giver. Interestingly, Job attributes these “horrible” events to God’s hand, even though we know from the narrative that Satan was the instigator. Job was not infected with the common notion that all “good” events come from God, and all “bad” events come from Satan.

Lastly, in light of who he is and who God is, Job gives an exclamation from the heart—“Blessed be the name of the Lord.” Just after experiencing events that would crush most people, Job can only express love to God for who he is. Job (by grace) has disproved Satan’s thesis. Or is Satan convinced?

Satan’s Second Challenge (2:1-6)—Satan now suggests that any man can sustain loss as long as his own hide remains intact. “Touch his body, and he will curse you,” is the challenge of the Accuser. For his own glorious purposes, God allows Satan to inflict any bodily anguish upon Job, short of death. Now things get real close to home.

Job’s Second Catastrophe (2:7-10)—The servant of God is covered from head to toe with boils. He is so bad off that even his wife suggests that Job curse God and die. Does Job love God only as long as he is in good health? No. He replies to his wife that both good and bad seasons can be expected from God’s hand. He is not just a God of good things; he is God in all things. Through the duration of these two rounds of incredible trials, Job maintained his integrity (1:22; 2:10).

Job’s Three Friends (2:11-13)—The interchange between Job and his three friends occupies most of the story. By skipping over it, I would not want to imply that it is insignificant. However, for our purposes here, I would note one point in this context. The statements of Job’s friends are mixed with truth and mistaken perspectives. But one thing they did at the outset of their encounter with Job is noteworthy: “They sat down with him...and none spake a word unto him: for they saw that his grief was very great.” When times of deep trial come into the lives of others, your presence in silence may be the most appropriate ministry at that point. This is not a time for easy answers and clichés.

Job’s Faltering (3:3)—In reaction to the presence of his friends, Job utters words that do not reflect the steadfastness of his earlier confessions. However, we note that he still does not curse, or deny his God in these remarks. Rather, his focus is on his circumstances. Before we come down too hard on Job, we must remember that he was totally unaware of why all these things had come upon him. He knew nothing about Satan’s challenges before God’s presence. Neither Job nor his friends could speak with certainty as to why Job was stricken with calamity. From this we must learn to be very cautious about interpreting providence as it relates to others. It is rather arrogant for us to think we can discern the reasons behind others’ calamities. Since affliction is often not associated with sin, we need to be especially careful about judging others to be in disfavor with God because of trials that come into their lives.

Also, we must be careful in our interpretation of “negative” providence in our own lives. Often, we are at a loss to know just why some loss or trial comes into our experience. However, we can certainly have some degree of confidence that if we ask God to show us our sins or our lessons, he will do it. But there will no doubt always be events in our lives that—from our finite perspective—leave huge question marks in our hearts. God is not obligated to fill us in as to why he does various things. We know for sure that in whatever he chooses to do, “the Judge of all the earth will do right” (Gen 18:25). Further, we can be sure that whatever comes into a believer’s life is ultimately for his good, and toward the goal of his conformity to Christ (Rom 8:28-29).

God’s Compassion (42:10,12)—James points out that the “end of the Lord” in the case of Job displayed his compassion and mercy. God did not have to prosper Job in the end, but he was pleased to give Job more than he had in the beginning. The Lord had given; the Lord had taken away; and the Lord was pleased to give again.

God has nowhere promised to bless his people with an abundance of material things. But he has purposed in Christ to bless us abundantly both in this age and the one to come. For those who leave all to follow Christ, there is a promise of a “hundredfold now in this time” (Mark 10:29-30). In the age to come, the saints will have Christ as their inheritance, and there will be no more tears, sorrows and suffering. If we can keep before our eyes the example of Job, it seems to me that we’ll be armed with the proper perspectives by which to face the afflictions of this age. All questions and doubts were not removed for Job, and neither will they be for us. May the patience and endurance of Job be used by the Holy Spirit to equip us for the things that will inevitably come our way as we await the glorious coming of Jesus Christ our Lord. □

—Jon Zens

ADVANTAGES OF ADVERSITY

“Blessed be God...the God of all comfort who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God”—2 Cor 1:3-4

Adversity is Inevitable

God conducts a school of adversity in which many of the lessons are spelled out in blood, sweat and tears. God has decreed distresses for his children. The wilderness is still the road to Canaan. Christ went through Bethany (the house of grief) before entering Jerusalem (the vision of peace). Gethsemane preceded glory. What was said of Christ may be said of every Christian, “Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory?” (Luke 24:26).

The apostle Paul was set forth by the Lord Jesus as the great example of the Church: “For this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting” (1 Tim 1:16). In Paul, Christ portrays as a pattern for future believers his longsuffering to the greatest of sinners and all longsuffering in the greatest of saints. “For I will show him how great things he must suffer for my name’s sake” (Acts 9:16). We, too, are given the service of suffering. It is often much easier to serve Christ by working than to serve him by suffering. When going through troubles it is a good thing to read the account of Paul’s testings. Our hardships are merely a pinprick in comparison—labors, stripes, prisons, deaths, beatings, stoned, shipwreck, perils, painfulness, hunger, thirst, cold, nakedness, and much more (2 Cor 11:23-28).

Every work for God is opposed. All of Satan’s territory that we invade is bitterly contended. Paul and Barnabas instructed believers concerning the oppositions that they must endure, saying, “We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:21-22). To be forewarned is to be forearmed. Paul thus forearmed the Thessalonians. “That no man should be moved by these afflictions: for yourselves know that we are appointed thereunto. For verily,

when we were with you, we told you before that we should suffer tribulation; even as it came to pass and ye know” (1 Thess 3:3-4). To the Philippians he wrote, “For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake” (Phil 1:29).

Peter also informs us that adversity is inevitable. “For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that we should follow his steps” (1 Peter 2:21). In Hebrews 12:6-7 we are told that sonship and suffering go together. “For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons: for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?” David, the man after God’s own heart, also experienced that suffering is bound to come to the saint. “Many are the afflictions of the righteous; but the Lord delivereth him out of them all” (Psalm 34:19).

Our Lord himself, perhaps more than any other, graciously prepared us ahead of time to expect adversity, as well as how to meet it. “Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves” (Matt 10:16). Our position as sheep is often precarious and uncomfortable. He said, “The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you...In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 15:20; 16:33).

Adversity is Invaluable

The best things of life come of suffering. Before the flowers can adorn our gardens, the soil must be broken and the weeds pulled. Before the symmetrical statue can be erected, the marble must be quarried, sawn and chiseled. Before the orchestra can send forth its harmony, the instruments must pass through a process of tuning. Before the body can enjoy healing, the bitter medicine must be applied. Before the day of graduation, years of study must pass.

Adversity is invaluable to our character. “It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes” (Psalm 119:71). Trouble drives us to the heart of the Word and the Word into our heart. Adversity not only causes us to learn God’s Word, but also to keep it. “Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word” (Psalm 119:67). It is one thing to know the Bible and another thing to keep and obey it. Suffering is the school of obedience. “Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered” (Heb 5:8).

Sonship nor any amount of holiness, love, or prayer can exempt us from the school of adversity. Yet suffering does not mar sonship; rather it is the greatest teacher, because it touches our self, and sweeps away all sham, thus molding our character and deepening it in holiness and righteousness. The apostle says that God chastens us “for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness. Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby” (Heb 12:10-11).

The Patience of Job

Perspectives for the Heart in Times of Affliction

“Ye have heard of the patience of Job” (James 5:11)

Many are the afflictions of the righteous” (Psalm 34:19). This is a theme that runs throughout Scripture. “But the Lord delivereth him out of them all.” This is the comfort that has come to God’s people throughout the ages.

Various kinds of afflictions are set forth in the Bible. Three of these may be listed as: **(1)** those that come in connection with a person’s confession of the gospel (Luke 6:22); **(2)** those that come from our loving Father as chastisement because of our sins (Heb 12:5-11); and **(3)** those that come upon all people as a result of existence in a fallen world, without reference necessarily to personal sin (Ecc 3: 8:6-17; etc.). The book of Job, which will be examined, primarily deals with the test of Job’s relationship to God. What came upon this righteous man had nothing to do with any sins he had committed.

If afflictions are inevitable in Christian experience, it behooves us to prepare our hearts. One key way for us to do this is to learn from what happened to those of old (1 Cor 10:11). With respect to patience and perseverance in the midst of trial, no better Old Testament example can be found than Job. His response to incredible emotional and physical hardship is most instructive to us. Let us consider some very basic, but significant points in the opening chapters of Job.

Job’s Character & Circumstances (1:1-5)—The text reveals some crucial things about his person: he was “blameless, upright, fearing God, turning away from evil” (NASV). Job was a man of faith and accepted before God. As to his possessions, Job is described as being “the greatest of all the men of the East.” He was a man of vast wealth as the story begins. Verses 4-5 give some insight into the piety of Job. He was concerned for his family to the point where he would offer sacrifices on their behalf.

Job’s Character Challenged (1:6-12)—This section highlights the truth that “we wrestle not against flesh and blood...” (Eph 6:12). A spiritual battle is going on that is beyond our sight. We must remember this as it is so easy to forget in the midst of the tangible things that surround our existence. As Satan had traveled around the earth, God asked him, “Hast thou considered my servant Job?” God’s assessment of Job was very positive. This ought to be an encouragement to our hearts. In spite of our shortcomings and sins, God “defends” the character of his people in the face of the Accuser’s challenges. But the Devil claims that Job only fears God because he is blessed and prospered. If these comfortable surroundings were removed, Satan maintains, Job’s allegiance to God would cease. The issue is clear: Does Job love God in all circumstances, or

Trouble is often that which the Lord uses in order to draw us back to himself. “Though I walk in the midst of trouble, thou wilt revive me” (Psalm 138:7). It is in the center of disaster that he revives us, not fails us. Peter gives some remarkable results of suffering: “But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you” (1 Peter 5:10). We are made perfect, mature, fully equipped as a soldier for useful duty. Suffering establishes and strengthens us to be able to resist attack. It settles us, giving us as a tree a firm rooting and grounding so that we shall not be moved.

A tree transplanted every week would not flourish. Thus adversity is the process used to help us to become set in permanent and godly habits of life. “The trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting in nothing” (James 1:3-4). Patience is a pearl found only in the deep sea of affliction. “We glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope” (Rom 5:3-4). In the natural man, tribulation worketh impatience which sours into hopelessness; while in a new man, tribulation worketh patience which soars to the heights of rejoicing “in hope of the glory of God” (v2).

Our characters are beautified when we have close fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Those who know him in the fellowship of his sufferings are those who become conformed to his likeness. “Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: but rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers [sharers] of Christ’s sufferings” (1 Peter 4:12-13). “He knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold” (Job 23:10). Suffering has the power to transform our lives to be like Jesus. “Every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth [pruneth] it, that it may bring forth more fruit” (John 15:2). The knife of suffering cuts away useless branches that prevent the life-giving sap from producing an abundance of choice fruit.

Adversity is also a valuable means in preparing us for comforting others in their time of suffering. We are able to truly sympathize with them having gone through it ourselves. The training is costly. Job’s friends were “miserable comforters” because they had never experienced adversity such as Job was passing through, and their words were powerless to help. The world is full of comfortless hearts.

The apostle Paul tells how valuable was his experience of imprisonment. “But I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel” (Phil 1:12). The Philippians looked on Paul’s imprisonment as a calamity, but he showed that it was a means of blessing. Paul finally reached his long prayed-for desire of preaching Christ in Rome, even though he had not anticipated going there as a prisoner.

Adversity is not only invaluable to us in this life for our character and conduct, but also in the life to come for our

capacity for glory. “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” (2 Cor 4:17). If we only realized the work which our daily tribulations perform for us in storing up a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory for future enjoyment, we would not shun and despise them, but rather welcome all that God permits.

Paul indicated that there is a definite quantitative and qualitative relation between our sufferings with Christ here and our participation with Christ in glory. “If so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together. For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Rom 8:17-18).

Also compare the value of trials in this life in relation to their reward in the next life. “That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:7). How often, however, we show a perverted sense of values, for we act as savages bartering away gold for trinkets. Our Lord counsels us to buy of him gold tried in the fire that we may be rich.

The afflicted Hebrew Christians were commended for the manner in which they suffered the loss of material things in this life because they valued the things of the next life. “For ye had compassion of me in my bonds, and took joyfully the spoiling of your goods, knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance” (Heb 10:34).

Adversity is Not Invincible

The wars and battles of this world may be won, but usually at a great loss to the conqueror. In life’s fight against adversities, Christians suffer the loss of no essential thing, and thus we can be said to be more than conquerors. “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us” (Rom 8:35-37). As grain loses only the useless chaff by being beaten with the flail, so Christians lose only hindrances and impurities by the refining process of adversity. Faith is strengthened, love is expanded, experience is deepened, and knowledge is increased.

We, then, have a secret weapon against adversity, a weapon that is put into our hands by Christ himself. It is not a death-dealing atomic bomb reigning terror and horror on mankind, but our secret weapon in this unceasing fight against the troubles of life is found in one word that is so often coupled with victory over suffering in the Scriptures. That secret weapon is rejoicing! “The joy of the Lord is your strength” (Neh 8:10). But notice this joy is not mere pumped-up exuberance that the world calls joy. It is the joy of the Lord; a joy from God and in God. “But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ’s sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy” (1 Peter 4:13).

“My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations [trials]” (James 1:2). Do we know the secret of extracting joy from the jolts of life? experiencing joy in all trials? counting it all joy, pure joy, the highest joy, when we are tried?

Paul was warned of the sufferings ahead, but notice his emphasis on rejoicing: “And now, behold, I go bound in the spirit unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there: save that the Holy Ghost witnesseth in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions abide me. But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:22-24).

Note the emphasis on rejoicing by the Old Testament prophet in trial. “Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation” (Hab 3:17-18).

We are able to rejoice in suffering for Christ’s sake because it is by Christ’s appointment and with Christ’s support, “...and took joyfully the spoiling of your goods” (see Heb 10:32-35). “Blessed [happy] are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven” (Matt 5:11-12). “We glory in tribulations” (Rom 5:3). “Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong” (2 Cor 12:9-10).

“And they [the disciples] departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name” (Acts 5:41). “In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). We’re always on the winning side with Christ; we cannot lose, for “all things work together for good to them that love God” (Rom 8:28). Thus we’re more than conquerors, for we have full assurance of victory all through the battle. □

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