

Trials - Their Meaning and Use

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“My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations [trials]” (James 1:2).

The temptations spoken of in the above chapter are of two kinds. The word “temptations” in verse 2 contemplates the ordinary trials of life — loss, sickness, bereavement, etc. In verse 12 when it says, “Blessed is the man that endureth temptation,” the meaning is the same. But the being “tempted,” to which reference is made in verses 13 and 14, has to do with sin, and is manifestly of a different character. God doesn’t tempt in this sense. This makes it perfectly clear that temptation, as spoken of in this chapter, covers two distinct ideas for it is clear that we are tempted or tried by God in the one case, while, with regard to the other, it affirms “neither tempteth He any man” to sin.

Moreover, the phraseology used in the chapter before us with reference to each kind of temptation makes the above distinction quite evident. In verse 2 we are told to “count it all joy” when we “fall into divers temptations.” Such words could not possibly be applicable to the being “drawn away of his own lust, and enticed,” as mentioned in verses 13 and 14 in connection with the second aspect of temptation.

The Trying of Faith

God does not tempt any man to sin. The words, “neither tempteth He any man,” are very plain on this point. But He does tempt His people in the sense of trying them. Thus, we read in Genesis 22, “God did tempt Abraham,” that is in the sense of proving him.

It is, then, in respect of the ordinary trials of life that we are to count it all joy “when [we] fall into divers temptations.” And the reason for what, at first, seems such an extraordinary exhortation is: “Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience.” There is a distinct moral gain — character is developed. It takes on a new quality — patience. Moreover, as the Apostle Peter reminds us, the proving of our faith is “much more precious than of gold that perisheth.” We come out of the trial with some additional faith. All the gold placed in the crucible may come out again, but no more comes out than was put in, whereas faith is increased by being tried.

Do we count it all joy when a trial comes? Are we not often prone to regard the matter from the very opposite standpoint, and rejoice when we escape? How then do we regard the diverse trials? — wave upon wave, storm after storm, one trial following another in rapid succession, just as it was with Job. No sooner had one messenger told his pitiful tale than another appeared with a story still more distressing.

Finding Benefit in Trial

The answer to verse 2 is verse 3. As we look at the trials themselves they are not a source of joy, and never can be. We are to think of their outcome. “Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience.” God is supremely solicitous about character. His business is that of a Refiner. He has planned to have a city all of gold — of pure gold — and He is preparing the

material today. And the experience of His people in all ages has been this “For Thou, O God, hast proved us: Thou hast tried us as silver is tried” (Psalm 66:10). Yet when these trials come, we are in a hurry to be rid of them! Too often, this is our only thought. Verse 4 suggests that it should not be so, but rather that we should seek the full benefit of the trial. “But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.” “Perfect and entire, wanting nothing!” If our trials can do this for us, are they in vain? Are they, after all, a mistake? We have looked upon them as a bane, and they have become our greatest blessing!

It is the use we make of trial and its results which alone enables us to count it all joy when such experience befalls us. Phillips Brooks, in a remarkable sermon on the Valley of Baca, points out that the prayer book version of Psalm 84:6 is: “Who going through the vale of misery use it for a well,” and he says, “The lesson of the Vale of Baca (the vale of misery) evidently is the turning of sorrow into joy.” He goes on to distinguish between two views of life: one, the view of compensation, the other, the view of transformation. The first is the effort to balance the discomfort, the sorrow, the disappointments that overtake us, against the joys and successes that come to us, or that we hope will be ours another day. Then there is the principle that if it rains today it will be more likely to be fine tomorrow. This view finds its extreme limit in consoling ourselves that if this life has been full of pain and trial, heaven will be all the richer and more restful by and by. This is the theory of compensation.

Transformation

The view of transformation, on the other hand, is bound up with the use, here and now, which can be made of sorrow and suffering. “Who passing through the vale of misery use it for a well.” The trials, the miseries, the discomfitures of this life are of some use. “If we go on,” he says, “to find out something about the methods of this economy of transformation, how it is that suffering is not merely succeeded by, but turned into joy, I suppose the one great answer that includes all others must be this: that suffering contains the elements of the highest happiness because it involves the condition of weakness, of helplessness, of dependence.” And he adds, “There is something very beautiful to me in the truth that suffering, rightly used, is not a cramping, binding, restricting of the human soul, but a setting of it free.”

It is for this reason that we can “count it all joy when [we] fall into divers temptations.” Our very helplessness under these trials becomes a source of strength and ultimately a means of victory. And for this reason the soul becomes more open to God because of its very need. It is brought where He alone can help it, and where He alone can offer the needed consolation. These diverse trials are so many avenues by which God can reach us and by which He reveals Himself to us; they are channels by which He pours in the riches of His grace, and they are avenues, too, by which the soul reaches God.

“Oh, how many battered cottages — ‘the soul’s dark cottage battered and decayed — ’” says Phillips Brooks, “have thus let in the light! How many broken bodies have set their souls free, and how many shattered homes have let the men and women who sat in darkness inside them see the great light of a present God! Stronger by weakness . . . I have seen a man whom the world called a fearful sufferer, living delightful days in this high study of the ways of God. Day by day his Maker took some strength out of his life, unstrung some nerve, put some pain in.

But the suffering of a decaying body was so far surpassed by the rare joy of feeling his Maker's hands busy in the body and the spirit He had made, and of studying His wondrous ways of working, that his hours of sickness were the happiest that he had ever lived. He saw God glorifying Himself, and was abundantly content; that was the well of which he drank.

“One who was Man, yet mightier than man, has walked the vale before us. When He walked it, He turned it all into a well of living water. To them who are willing to walk in His footsteps, to keep in His light, the well He opened shall be forever flowing. Yes, it shall pass into him and fulfill there Christ's own words: 'Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst, but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.'”

Trial Produces Patience

The use of “divers trials” is indicated here in that they are said to work patience. The trials are permitted, not for their own sake, but that this fine quality of patience may be produced in us — patience which was the prime and outstanding quality of an apostle. Not patience in the sense merely of forbearance, but of endurance, involving indeed the qualities of submission and of quiet waiting.

And surely divine grace never achieves a greater victory than when it subdues the restless will and the insubordination and independence so characteristic of us by nature.

But patience must have her perfect work, for all this is not accomplished at one stroke. God's end in all His discipline of us is that we “may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.”

It is important to notice the process indicated. The diverse trials are the trying of our faith. Only those who already possess faith can know anything of this experience, for it is our faith which is tested, and it must first exist. The world knows nothing of this, and consequently the worldling appears often to have a happier, easier time than the child of God.

Faith During Trial

When there is faith, God will always be present with us in the trial. There may, at times, be a tendency to exaggerate our cares and difficulties, the mere consequence of taking a false view of the situation. In any case, it does not do to be occupied with them. Trials may also arise from our own state. We have a wrong outlook on life, or we are seeking ends that are not good, or some evil propensity is unjudged — pride, vanity, or lust of some kind is dominating our life. Something in us needs to be corrected. Often it is a mistake to expect immediate relief. We only aggravate the trouble by continually insisting upon a cessation of the grievance. “It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord.” Again, there are trials which are sent in order to fit us for higher service, to bring us into closer touch with God. But however we may be tried, and for whatever reason, it tests the reality of our faith, and that faith is increased by exercise.

Wisdom

What we need most of all in these dealings of God with us, and in the exercise they produce, is wisdom, lest we should misunderstand their purpose and fail to realize the blessing they are designed to bring. It is not a little remarkable that, in immediate connection with our subject, we are told "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him." How apt we are to think at times that we could manage things better than God. We would run our lives on a different plan, if we had the management of them, we sometimes think. All should be managed differently, ease and self-indulgence taking the place of all trial. The tragedy that would ensue can scarcely be realized. The lack of wisdom stands in the passage related to these various trials. And no wonder, for nowhere is our lack of wisdom more apparent than in the way in which, oftentimes, these trials are regarded. When undergoing some heavy trial how apt we are to think that God lacks wisdom (or else love) but it is we who lack the wisdom, yet God, in His mercy, is ready to bestow what we so much need. If He tells us to ask Him for it, He must possess it, while the very asking implies that wisdom is just what we lack. We need wisdom to discern all things from His standpoint, and to look upon the "divers trials" even as He does who permits them.

And just here faith finds room for further exercise. "Let him ask in faith, nothing wavering." What a gain then — and, can we say it? what a cause for "all joy" — if, out of these ugly and unwelcome sorrows, privations and bitternesses, there comes to us not only patience but wisdom!

Crown of Life

Then we are reminded of the "ups" and "downs" incidental to this life. Those of "low degree" exalted; the rich made low (verses 9-10). But the end? "Blessed is the man that endureth temptation [trial]: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love Him." "The crown of life!" Is there not already a foretaste of what this will mean? It is not some crown of mere silver or gold, not an outward ornament of any kind, it is the crown of life — life made richer — life that has reached its fullest development and highest attainment. For this crown is promised "to them that love Him."

Trials Produce Love

There is another result of these "divers trials," perhaps the richest and most wonderful of all. Not only do they work patience, and lead to the attainment of wisdom and a crown of life, but they produce love. Never can we understand or rightly appreciate these trials unless we love God — hence the crown of life is to them that love God. Similarly, in Romans 8, "All things work together for good to them that love God." They cannot work for good to anyone else. We come to see how God loves us by and in the very trials He sends us, and we love Him in response. Patience, wisdom, and love — these will form our crown forever in conjunction with any particular crown the Lord may see fit to bestow.

The passage we are considering leads us away from the diverse trials into the presence of a most wonderful truth — face to face, so to speak, with God and with the correct understanding of Him: "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning." If this is true,

nothing but good can reach us. We cannot trust our own hearts, but we can trust His. To the one who knows Him not, the trials of this life are but darkness, but to the one who knows Him, God is none other than the Father of lights. He has been revealed — revealed in the Son of His love, in Jesus. We do not have to grope now amid the darkness of Sinai, or listen to the awful voice from the mountain of smoke and thunder, so calculated to inspire terror; neither do we have to judge God by our own circumstances, or personal experiences. We do not have to stumble and stray amid the oftentimes perplexing dispensations of His providence, or try in vain to discover Him as He moves in mysterious and terrible form across the page of history — for lo! these are but parts of His ways and in none of them can we fully discover Him. Only in Jesus can He be known. In Jesus God is declared to be the Father of lights. In that perfect life and above all, in the cross, God is clearly revealed and His fatherhood unveiled.

God the Source of All Good

And the apostle prefaces this statement about the Father of lights with this word: “Do not err, my beloved brethren,” for this is just where so many do err, and err fatally, and thus form a false conception of God. In whatever other way you make mistakes, do not err here — God cannot be anything else than the source of all that is good and perfect — and in this there is no variableness nor suggestion of a change. Even the “divers trials” must not shake our faith in this fundamental fact. “My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptation [trials]; knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothingBlessed is the man that endureth temptation [trial]; for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love Him.”

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