

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Conditions a Christian will face: Trial

What an inspiration Joseph Scriven is! On the eve of his wedding, his fiancée was drowned. He emigrated to Canada, and was again engaged to be married. However, tragedy struck a second time, and his bride to be was killed by disease. Coping with his own ill health and trying circumstances, he still found the spiritual resources to write the now famous words, "What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear" to his own mother who was experiencing difficulties in her own life. How did he do it? How could he endure such trial and still remain faithful to his Lord?

I have to admit I often smile inwardly as I sing the words:

*"Have we trials and temptations,
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged
Take it to the Lord in prayer."*

It so often seems that there is trouble just about everywhere! It is with a very profound sense of trepidation that I approach this morning's subject. On the one hand, there are so many who, today, will be undergoing severe trial, of one sort or another. Compared to them, I know so little of what it is to go through experiences that cause profound suffering. And yet to compare sufferings is pointless. What is "water off a duck's back" to one, is a real difficulty to another. On the other hand, so often when one teaches on a subject, the Lord immediately tests you on what you have said, and I don't want to face trials in my life. We naturally long for a quiet life, an easygoing existence. He wants to discover whether we really believe what we say.

The book of Job stands as a testimony to the sufferings and trials of one man, and all that he learnt through them. As we read through the first eight chapters, we see that Job experienced at least four different types of trial, and yet they seem to pretty much cover the whole range of human experience. Firstly, in chapter 1, we see that Job undergoes the loss of his **possessions**. How much we rely upon what we have as a source of security in our lives! I remember when we were burgled for the first time; the sense of invasion of my life was quite profound, far worse than the loss of the actual possessions. How often the sense that what we have is not sufficient becomes overpowering. We desire more, or different circumstances, anything but what is our present lot. Job was to learn through bitter experience that his life was not to be defined by what he owned, and his position in life. Secondly, we read that Job suffers the loss of his **family**. In the book "*The Two Towers*," King Theoden laments that no father should ever have to bury his own son! By its very random unfairness, bereavement can leave great gaping holes in our lives. Divorce, family breakdown, and unfulfilled wishes for one's loved ones all fall into this category of trial, where the natural insulating safety of the family is taken away, leaving us exposed to a harsh world. Thirdly, in chapter 2, we read that next Job suffers the loss of his **health**. Afflicted by painful sores, his very existence became an agony. Day in, day out, he faced the prospect of further suffering. To some extent, one can meet head on the first two forms of trial, with a defiance that they will not triumph. However, the loss of one's health, physically or mentally, saps the individual of the will to fight, to overcome. Together, these three awful trials left Job tired of life. As you read his words, you cannot help but get the feeling that he felt that he had lived too long. To say that he was suicidal is probably incorrect. Rather, in Christian terms, he just wished he was present with the Lord in glory. Robbie Williams, in a recent song, said that "I don't want to die, but I'm not keen on living either". That would probably be the experience of most people at some time in their life. Finally, in chapters 3 to 8, we see Job is **misunderstood and alone**. Perhaps of all the trials that we may have to endure, loneliness is the most severe. We are naturally social creatures; we need to feel that we belong, that someone else understands what we are going through. And yet for Job, those who came to comfort him only served to confirm his loneliness. Not even his wife was able to support Job through these experiences. Utterly alone, Job cries out, "May the day perish on which I was born". We live on a crowded planet, and yet loneliness seems more of a problem than at any other time. Elijah experienced it when he cried out, "I only am left". In increasingly small congregations, when others give up, or compromise their faith, to be left spiritually "high and dry" is no easy thing. Housebound, socially excluded, rejected by those around, the solitary life removes the joy of living. By the time we reach chapter 9, Job finds himself lamenting the fact that there is no-one to lay their hand on both him and God. He had no mediator. So downcast had he become that he feels himself alone in the universe. How privileged we are to know for a certainty the

One whom Job longed for: "For there is one mediator, the man Christ Jesus." In all the circumstances we face in life, let us never forget that there is one Man who has one hand upon us, and His other upon God.

What is absolutely central to understanding the sufferings of Job is that he never lost his "bedrock faith". For sure, there were times that he tired of life, when he felt unjustly treated, when his sorrows crashed around him in an unending barrage of the emotions. And yet through it all, Job maintained a relationship with his God, deep within himself, in the place where external influences barely touch. Let us read together three startling statements from his lips that showed a spiritual faith centuries before his time.

"Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him. Even so, I will defend my own ways before Him. He also shall be my salvation." Job 13:15-16. "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God." Job 19:25-26. "But He knows the way that I take; when He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold." Job 23:10.

We can only wonder how Job received these almost New Testament insights into the ways of God. Despite the circumstances of his life, Job never forgot his spiritual inheritance. So often when we face trials of one kind or another, we blame God, "How can He let this happen?" Well, that may be quite natural, but God would always have us come to Him, a very present help, as a first resort.

Recently my daughter bought herself a Russian dwarf hamster. It promptly escaped, squeezing through the bars of the cage. After nearly a day missing, it was not looking good. My younger son was telling his grandpa about the missing hamster. "Well", said grandpa, "perhaps we should pray that Jesus will help you find it." To which my son replied, "Oh no, I think we should look first!" We are all like my son sometimes. By our actions, by our stubbornness, we try to find a way out of our difficulties, when perhaps God would have us first come to Him, to bring the problem to Him, for Him to sustain us in and through the trial. So often, it is only as a last resort that we are forced to our knees, as the weight of our worries overwhelms us. How much we need to cultivate a habit of coming early to God when a problem looms!

Time and again, throughout the Old Testament, we see that it is in the hard circumstances that an individual learns most of their God, whilst it is when life is easy that failure sets in! It was to the Israelites in the wilderness that God revealed Himself through the Law. It was to David in Adullam that those who were in distress, and in debt and discontented came. From there it was that they became mighty warriors for God. Some of my favourite characters in the Bible are described in 2 Samuel 23. It was at Cherith, which means a cutting place, that Elijah learned of God's ability to provide. Let us never feel that difficulties and trials are God's way of punishing us. Of course, if we are wilfully disobedient, then we cannot be too surprised if we end up in trouble. But when trials come our way, making hard a life already difficult as we try to follow Him, then let us know that probably He has something very special for us, it is His best that He desires for us.

So how do we respond to trials? The path to recovery for Job, and for us, was to be taken outside of himself. It is not until we come to chapter 38 of Job that God Himself answers Job. And yet in many ways, the answer Job receives is no answer at all, or at least not the sort of answer we would have expected. You see, God does not tell Job the reasons for his suffering. Nor does He explain to him just how it all fits into His plan. No, instead, God really shows Job that his questioning is foolish because he does not understand the character of God. God shows Job His greatness by a series of questions that lead Job to realise that he is like a baby before God. Were you there when the stars were made? Did you give the horse its strength? Can you cause it to rain? Like a devastating hammer blow the answer to all these questions and many more that we get in the following chapters is no, no, no! It is not until we come to the very last chapter of Job, and verses 5-6, that we see the effect of the trials Job faced. So we read: "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes." The effect of all the trials that Job went through was to give him a much clearer appreciation of God, and a better understanding of his own worthlessness. No longer was his knowledge of God second hand, hearing with the ear only. No, now Job had seen God for himself. This is exactly the purpose of the trials that God allows into the lives of His children today. So often we too may cry out to God, "Why me?" looking for some meaningful answer. But suffering so often is random, unfair, without meaning. God would not have us understand the reasons for why things happen. He would have us learn to depend upon Him more, and to learn of His limitless ability to sustain us throughout all the circumstances of our lives. If we could understand everything that happened to us now, then we would soon become independent of God, and in so doing miss out on far more. It is not for us, then, to understand the whys and wherefores of all that happens to us. In his letter to the Romans 9:21, Paul writes, "Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honour and another for dishonour?" He is taking up the theme that we find in Isaiah 29 and 45. As our Creator, God has the sovereign right to make our circumstances and us in any way He should choose. Though we do, it is not for us to question why the events of our lives are the way they are. It is sufficient to know they are the way they are because God has allowed it to be so.

Had Joseph Scriven not undergone such trial personally, could he ever have written the hymn that he did, which has been a help to so many others? At the time, no suffering and trial is pleasant, but neither is it purposeless. There is a reason, though we may only realise what this may be with the benefit of many years of hindsight. Paul could write, in Romans 8:28: "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." God is in control at all times. We certainly do not always appreciate how this can be. If we did, He would not be a very great God. But through the most evil of acts, the most harrowing of trials, things that ought never to happen, He is able to work, to bring good. One of my favourite choruses as a youngster was:

*"In His time, in His time,
He makes all things beautiful, in His time.
Lord please show me every day
As You're teaching me Your way,
That You do just as You say,
In Your time."*

Oh, for such a simple child-like faith in times of trouble, to be kept from questioning God's motives, and to be ready to wait for His time. It is one of the great perplexities of His character that although He is timeless, He works in time. He has a limit to all that He allows. In Revelation 2:10, we read the Lord's comforting promise to the church at Smyrna. There the Christians were being terribly persecuted. In picture form it represented the church during the terrible persecutions under the Roman emperors, for example Nero. And yet what does Jesus promise? He says, "Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation 10 days."

I've always seen in that statement, 10 days, the fact that God knows just how long the trial was to last, and it wouldn't be a moment more. He knows we are but dust, and His promise that "a bruised reed He will not break" is particularly true of those who are in the midst of trial. He will test us, and test us, but so long as we remain in daily contact with Him in prayer, and through reading His word, He will never break us, nor will the trials He permits. And there perhaps is the key. In all circumstances, good and bad, day in, day out, we need to realise that prayer and the reading of His word is absolutely vital.

One of the real difficulties in times of trouble is maintaining a proper perspective. We become so focused on ourselves. Everything depends upon me. It's all my fault. It's down to me to sort things out. We have already seen God's remedy for this - to take us out of ourselves. We need to lift our eyes up just to get a proper perspective. On a poster at work are the words, "It's hard to remember you were only cleaning out the swamp, when you are up to your eyes in alligators."

Sometimes in times of trial we feel "up to our eyes in alligators". It is at just such a time that we particularly need to look up! To the Christians in Rome, Paul could write, in 8:18: "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us." Paul, probably more than many, suffered for his faith.

- Physically, at Philippi in prison.
- Spiritually, as he has his authority doubted.
- Emotionally, as he sees all those in Asia forsaking him, and as he feels the care of all the churches.

In so many ways, and yet in comparison to what is in store for us, it was momentary, and light. Perhaps the rest of your life holds only the prospect of pain, or loneliness. Still Paul would urge us to compare that with an eternity in the Father's house where no pain, no tears, no trials can ever come. As those that believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, we are bound for heaven. The life we live now is only to prepare us for the life we shall enjoy then, in much the same way that the life an unborn baby lives is to prepare it for life after birth.

As we draw to a close then, it is fitting that we should read Paul's autobiography, in 2 Corinthians 4:8-18. You might feel that Paul was special, and so he was. But his Saviour and Lord is just the same. The strength Paul received from Him is just the same for us, and the resources God made available to Paul, are identical to those He makes available to all believers.

"We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed - always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So then death is working in us, but life in you. But since we have the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, "I believed and therefore I spoke," we also believe and therefore speak, knowing that He who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus, and will present us with you. For all things are for your sakes, that grace, having spread through the many, may cause thanksgiving to

abound to the glory of God. Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.”

Let us never lose hope, not even on the darkest of days. To complete the story of Job, we should just note that at the end of his life, he got back double all that he had lost, and in the names of his daughters we see renewed hope for living. As Christians, our future is all heavenly, but who can doubt that we shall inherit more than double all that we have lost for His sake now? Finally, never forget to sing! Music has a great, uplifting effect, and the opportunity to sing praise and worship, particularly through our tears, is one of the most marvellous spiritual resources we have. How often I have felt tired and down at the end of a week, and then spent an hour in song with a group of young people, and come away renewed and refocused. Are you enduring trial today? Go on, really sing, fully from the heart, with others, or to a tape, or CD. It will not change your circumstances, but it will change you.

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