

The Purpose of Trials

Introduction

Going through any trial of life can be a joyous experience for a Christian if his perspective is right. Imagine the worst trial you could possibly face. Maybe for some it would be financial crisis, accompanied by the loss of one's savings.

For others it might be the loss of employment, with the resulting loss of dignity in being unable to support one's family. Perhaps it might be the announcement of a serious illness in your family, a fatal car accident, or the manifestation of evil in the form of rape, murder, or robbery. At least some of those tragic events touch us or our families in one way or another.

The book of Job reminds us that trouble is inevitable: "Man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward" (5:7). Anyone who tries to create a fantasy world where everything is perfect is setting themselves up for profound sorrow. Unfortunately the anticipation of sorrow and trouble often casts a shadow over our greatest joys.

Maybe that's the reason Scripture records Jesus weeping but never once laughing.

Perhaps He did laugh on occasion, but I think His happiness would have been offset by His overwhelming sadness over sin.

All of us, to some degree or another, are going to have to look right in the eyes of agony at some point in our lives. So we need to understand how to face that.

Job encountered some of the severest trials imaginable. He lost his children and his livestock, and his body was afflicted with painful boils. And worse, he was left with a wife who offered no sympathy. But in my judgment, the person who was probably faced with the severest trial any human being could ever endure was Abraham.

A. The Testing of Abraham

Genesis 22 describe the unimaginable test that God put Abraham through. I believe we can learn much from Abraham's example.

1. The request

"It came to pass ... that God did test Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am. And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of" (vv. 1-2).

That request did not fit Abraham's theology. There was no history in the covenant of God of human sacrifice. That was a pagan practice. No child of God would ever offer his own kind in sacrifice. Furthermore, Isaac was the son of promise. God had touched the dead loins of Abraham and Sarah and enabled them to produce a son who would be an integral part in fulfilling God's covenant with Abraham.

Why would God call for a human sacrifice when He never called for one before? It made no sense for God to miraculously enable a barren woman to produce a son He would later ask to be killed. Why would God make a promise to Abraham that he would be the father of many nations (Gen. 12:1-3) and then kill the only child he had?

The whole idea was bizarre. All hope of progeny and promise would die. And that would strike a blow at the covenant faithfulness of God. What makes it the severest trial imaginable is not that Isaac was to die, but that Abraham was to kill him with his own hand. It's one thing for the one you love die; it's something else to be told to kill that person. If there were ever anything God commanded that deserved a lengthy argument, this was it. We might have expected Abraham to say, "This makes no sense. I can't do it. Could you please explain Yourself?"

2. The response

"Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and cut the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him. Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off. And Abraham said to his young men, abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you. And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together. And Isaac spoke unto Abraham, his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together" (vv. 3-8).

Abraham, without questioning God or arguing with Him, immediately obeyed His request.

He demonstrated amazing faith in telling his servants that both he and his son would return, in telling his trusting son that God would provide the sacrifice.

I believe Abraham deep in his heart knew God had something in mind that was consistent with His character and His covenant.

3. The result

a) Abraham's obedience

"They came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac, his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son" (vv. 9-10).

What unbelievable faith! Now you understand the nature of faith that God reckons as righteousness (Gen. 15:6), and why Paul identified Abraham as the father of the faithful (Rom. 4:11-12). Apart from Christ he is our greatest role model for trusting in God. He is the epitome of submission and obedience to the will of God at any cost. God honored that, as the next verses show.

b) The angel's interruption

"The angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I. And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him, for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me" (vv. 11-12).

This had been a test to determine if Abraham would obey God, and he passed. This account shows that we might be tested in the things most near and dear to us. We may have to offer up our own Isaacs--the ones we love most--and give them to the Lord. Like Abraham, we must be willing to give up what is most precious to us. We must be ready to do anything God asks us to do, knowing that He is all-wise.

We all face many trials in life, but I can't imagine experiencing a trial like Abraham did. His obedience took a tremendous amount of self-denial, and therefore was of the highest degree of excellence. Abraham passed the test. That was confirmed when the angel of the Lord said, "Now I know that thou fearest God" (v. 12). Abraham revered God at the highest cost.

B. The Appraisal of Abraham

The commentary on this trial of Abraham is given in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews. Here we learn what enabled Abraham to pass such a test: "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac; and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, In Isaac shall thy seed be called; accounting [taking note of the fact] that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead" (vv. 17-19). Abraham was willing to obey God because he believed God could raise the dead, even though he had never before seen the dead raised to life. He believed God was so true to His Word and character that if He made a promise, He would even raise the dead to keep it. That is an example of tremendous faith. Is it any wonder he is the greatest human model of faith? Galatians 3 says, "They who are of faith, the same are the sons of Abraham.... They who are of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham" (vv. 7, 9). Anyone who lives by faith in God is in a spiritual sense a son of Abraham. He is the father of the faithful. The account of Abraham tells us that a man can go through the severest trial of life imaginable if he really trusts God, believing that He will keep His promise and accomplish His purposes without making mistakes.

We have to realize that God is going to allow us to go through tests, and that He is working all things out for His own holy purpose (Rom. 8:28). I know we all dream of a perfect environment of comfort and tranquility. Although any temporary rest from trials may lead us into thinking we might find permanent exemption from them, our lives on earth will never be free from trials. David reflected that truth when he said, "In my prosperity I said, I shall never be moved" (Ps. 30:6). We can live in a fool's paradise, never forecasting any trouble and promising predicting a future of ease, but that is a fantasy. Christ warned His disciples and all who follow in His footsteps to expect trials in this life (John 15:18[en]16-6).

Puritan Thomas Manton once observed that God had one Son without sin, but no Son without a cross. As Christians, we can be assured that we will have trials. But our confidence is that we will have victory over them through the presence of God. Psalm 23 says, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me" (v. 4) Trials will come, but

God's grace will meet us in our time of need. They come for several purposes:

I. TRIALS TEST THE STRENGTH OF OUR FAITH

A. The Example of Hezekiah

There's a great illustration of how trials test the strength of one's faith in 2 Chronicles 32:31: "God left him [King Hezekiah], to test him, that he might know all that was in his heart." God didn't need to know by testing what was in Hezekiah's heart. He already knew by omniscience. God tests us so we can find out. He assists us in doing a spiritual inventory on ourselves by bringing trials into our lives to demonstrate the strength or weakness of our faith. If you're currently experiencing a trial and are shaking your fist at God and wondering why it's happening, that's a good indication that you have weak faith. If, on the other hand, you're resting and rejoicing in the Lord, having placed the trial into His care, then you have strong faith.

B. The Example of Habakkuk

When Habakkuk was facing the threat of the Chaldeans coming and wiping out his people, he could still rejoice in the Lord: "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 food; 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.

The Lord God is my strength, and he will make my feet like hinds' [mountain goats'] feet, and he will make me walk upon mine high places" (3:17-18). In the midst of the unsolvable mystery of why God allows the wicked to continue, the prophet recognized the sovereignty and wisdom of God, and was thereby strengthened.

C. The Example of Job

As a result of his testing, Job admitted before God, "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, by now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (42:5-6). Job confessed his sin of questioning God's wisdom and sovereignty when the trials he experienced had exposed the weakness of his faith.

II. TRIALS HUMBLE US

Trials remind us not to think too highly of our spiritual strength. That is illustrated by the testimony of Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:7: "Lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh." Paul had seen three vision of Jesus in His resurrection glory.

Also, God had bestowed on him the power to do miracles and reveal new truth. Such unique gifts could have led him to be proud. But God struck him with a very painful, chronic problem that forced him to rely on God.

Some people think the "thorn" was malaria picked up from his travels or an eye disease alluded to in Galatians 4:15 and 6:11. Other people think it was demonic opposition that was continually besetting him because he identified it as "the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure" (v. 7). Whatever it was, God used that trial to lead Paul to humbly depend on Him. God allows trials

in our lives to keep us humble--especially when we are blessed to be in a position of spiritual service. They can prevent us from becoming over-confident of our spiritual strength.

III. TRIALS WEAN US FROM WORLDLY THINGS

A. Explained

The longer we live, the more we accumulate--more furniture, cars, and investments--and we may experience more success or opportunities for travel. But in spite of the increase of worldly goods and pleasures, those things tend to have less and less significance in the lives of Christians. There was probably a time when you thought such things were most desirable, but now you realize they are incapable of solving the anxieties, hurts, and deeper problems of life. When trials come into your life and you reach out for those worldly things, you see what little lasting difference they make. So trials can wean you away from worldly things as they demonstrate their utter inability to solve any problem or provide any resource in a time of stress.

B. Exemplified

1. By Jesus

In John 6 Jesus "lifted up his eyes, and saw a great company come unto him [and] saith unto Philip, Where shall we buy bread, that these may eat? And this he said to test him; for he himself knew what he would do" (vv. 5-6). Philip's response was from a worldly viewpoint, for he commented that he and the other disciples didn't have enough money to feed such a crowd (v. 7). Jesus wanted to find out whether Philip looked to worldly resources or to Him for the answer. Once the disciples' inability to meet the need had been established, Jesus went on to demonstrate His miraculous power, and lifted them to greater faith in Him.

2. By Moses

Moses had been raised in Pharaoh's house as a prince of Egypt. As part of the royal family, he had the best education and reached the apex of Egyptian society in terms of wealth, honor, and comfort. But Hebrews 11:26 tells us that he considered the sacrifices made in identifying with God's purposes "greater riches than the treasures in Egypt." He had gotten his eyes off all of the worldly things available to him and began to be concerned about the trials of his people, which the Lord used to wean him away from those passing pleasures.

IV. TRIALS CALL US TO AN ETERNAL HOPE

A. Stated

The trials in my life increase my anticipation for heaven. This is the flip side of the previous point. Just as trials create a growing disinterest in the passing world, they also create a greater desire, for example, to be reunited with a loved one who has gone to be with the Lord. If the most precious people in your life have entered into the presence of our precious Savior, and if you have invested

your time and money in eternal things, then you won't have much tying you to this passing world.

B. Supported

1. Romans 8--Paul said, "The Spirit himself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are children of God; and if children, then heirs--heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ--if so be that we suffer with him, 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. For the earnest expectation of the creation waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God.... The creation itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.... We ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, that is, the redemption of our body, for we are saved by hope" (vv. 16-19, 21-24). Beyond this life of suffering is a glorious future for the believer that makes us all the more desirous for the fulfillment of salvation.

2. 2 Corinthians 4:16-18--Paul said, "We faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal." Trials give us a greater affection for that which is eternal.

They help us long for the eternal city of heaven.

You may wonder how Paul acquired that kind of attitude. In verses 8-10 he said, "We are troubled on every side ... we are perplexed ... persecuted ... cast down ... always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus." Paul was going through so much trouble, it's little wonder he didn't like the world and preferred to be in glory.

V. TRIALS REVEAL WHAT WE REALLY LOVE

A. Stated

Apart from God, nothing could have been dearer to Abraham than his son Isaac. But that was the test: to find out whether he loved Isaac more than God.

Trials test our love for God by how we react to them. If we supremely love God, we will thank God for what He is accomplishing through them. But if we love ourselves more than God, we will question God's wisdom and become upset and bitter. If anything is dearer to us than God, then He must remove it for us to grow spiritually.

B. Supported

1. Deuteronomy 13:3--Moses warned the Israelites about following false prophets, saying, "Thou shalt not hearken to the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams; for the Lord your God testeth you, to know whether ye love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul." The Lord tests us to see we truly love Him as much as we claim.

2. Luke 14:26-27--Jesus said, "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple." Jesus was not saying we're to hate everyone.

Rather He meant that if you do not love God to the degree that you willingly, if necessary, cut yourself off from your father, mother, spouse, children, brother, sister, or even your own life, then you don't love Him supremely. You must determine to do the will of God first and foremost, no matter what appeals others may make to you. In Jewish thinking, this devotion to God would be so intense that devotion to one's family would seem like hatred in comparison. In the case of Abraham we saw who he loved most. Abraham loved God more than his only son.

VI. TRIALS TEACH US TO VALUE GOD'S BLESSINGS

A. Explained

The world tells us that life is just the here and now, so we should enjoy it any price. But faith tells us to value God's Word, obey it, and receive His blessing.

Trials teach us the blessings of obedience. When we obey God's will in the midst of a trial, we are blessed.

B. Exemplified

1. By David

In Psalm 63:3 David says, "Because thy loving-kindness is better than life, my lips shall praise thee." That was written in the context of King Saul's mad pursuit to kill David (1 Sam. 23:14). Certainly trials like that enabled David to experience God's loving-kindness as he trusted in His protection.

2. By Jesus

Jesus is the perfect example of one who was blessed for His obedience. Hebrews 5:7-9 says that "in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared, though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; and being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation to all them that obey him." That is a reference to Jesus' suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:39-44). He chose to obey the Father's will, saying, "Not my will, but thine, be done" (v. 42). Philippians 2:8-9 mentions the results of His obedience: "He humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore, God also hath highly exalted him."

Trials put us through suffering so that we might obey and then receive the full blessing of God. As you learn to obey God, you will experience the exhilaration of that blessing.

VII. TRIALS ENABLE US TO HELP OTHERS IN THEIR SUFFERING

A. The Exhortation

Sometimes when suffering comes, it may have no more purpose than to make us better able to assist others in their own suffering. In Luke 22:31-32 Jesus says to Peter, "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not. And when thou art converted [restored], strengthen thy brethren."

All Christians have a responsibility to help those who are suffering. Second Corinthians 1:3-4 tells us that we go through trials for the purpose of comforting others with the comfort we have received. It is wonderful that God allows us to learn by experience to instruct others.

B. The Example

Hebrews 4:13-16 tells us Jesus is able to help all who come to Him because He has been through every trial we've been through. That's what makes Him a merciful high priest.

VIII. TRIALS PRODUCE ENDURANCE AND STRENGTH

Thomas Manton said that while all things are quiet and comfortable, we live by sense rather than faith. But the worth of a soldier is never known in times of peace.

One of God's purposes in trials is to give us greater strength. As you go through one trial, your spiritual muscles (faith) are exercised and strengthened for the next one. That means you can face greater foes and endure greater obstacles, thus becoming more useful to the Lord. And the more useful you are, the more you will accomplish His will in the power of His Spirit for His glory.

Focusing on the Facts

1. What made God's request of Abraham in Genesis 22:2 so difficult (see p. 1-2)?
2. Describe Abraham's response to God's request (see p. 2).
3. What was Abraham's test designed to show (see p. 3)?
4. Like Abraham, what must we be willing to give up (see p. 3)?
5. What enabled Abraham to pass such a test? Explain (Heb. 11:17; see p. 3).
6. What does the account of Abraham tell us that a man can do when facing the severest trial (see p. 4)?
7. Can Christians expect a perfect environment of comfort? Explain. What should be our confidence (see p. 4)?
8. Since God knows what's in our hearts, why does he test us (see p. 4)?
9. If a person is facing a trial, what response will indicate that he has weak faith? that he has strong faith (see p. 4)?

10. Explain the purpose of Paul's "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7; see p. 5).
11. What perspective did Moses have that allowed him to forfeit the treasures of Egypt (Heb. 11:26; see p. 6)?
12. If you have invested your time and money in eternal things, what kind of relationship will you have with the passing world (see p. 6)?
13. Why was Paul not defeated by the suffering he endured (Rom. 8:18-24; 2 Cor. 4:16-18; see pp. 6-7)?
14. What did Jesus mean by saying that his followers must hate their families (Luke 14:26-27; see p. 7-8)?
15. What does the world tell us to value? What does faith tell us to value (see p. 8)?
16. What blessings resulted from Jesus' obedience to do the Father's will (Heb. 5:7-9; Phil. 2:8-9; see p. 8)?
17. Explain how trials can result in our greater usefulness to the Lord (see p. 9).

Pondering the Principles

1. It is a natural tendency for people to reach out to worldly goods and pleasures for security, comfort, or meaning in midst of difficult circumstances. Psalm 20:6-8 says, "Now I know that the Lord saves His anointed; He will answer him from His holy heaven, with the saving strength of His right hand. Some boast in chariots, and some in horses; but we will boast in the name of the Lord, our God. They have bowed down and fallen; but we have risen and stood upright" (NASB). When you face a crisis, what resource do you turn to--the Word or the world? Meditate on Psalm 34, praising the One who is "near to the brokenhearted" and who rescues the righteous from their afflictions (vv. 18-19).

2. One purpose of trials is that they enable us to help others in their suffering. Read 2 Corinthians 1:3-11. Think about how you have been comforted by the "God of all comfort" (v. 3). Now think of those in your midst who are going through trials you have faced before. Pray for opportunities to be a source of comfort and encouragement to others who, for example, have lost a loved one or have been laid off from work. Help direct their faith from themselves to "God, who raises the dead" (v. 9).

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