

THE TRYING OF YOUR FAITH

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As President Trump ascended the platform to give his inaugural address on Friday, it began to rain. After the president's address, the Reverend Franklin Graham prayed. Before he did, he said, "Mr. President, in the Bible, rain is a sign of God's blessing. And it started to rain, Mr. President, when you came to the platform." Immediately, many on social media mocked Reverend Graham for his presumption. Did he forget that God destroyed the ancient world with a flood, and that rain can be a sign of divine judgment? Of course, he did not forget. Rather, he did as Christians have traditionally done: he interpreted his circumstance in the light of God's Word. Traditionally, Christians have interpreted drought as a sign of judgment, and rain as a sign of blessing. Of course, a destructive flood they have interpreted as a sign of judgment. Reverend Graham believes President Trump will right many wrongs, and so he considered that the rain was a symbol of God's favor. Whether Reverend Graham was right, or wrong, in his interpretation of the falling rain, he stands in a long tradition of Christians trying to understand God's reasons for their particular circumstance. We must interpret our circumstances, according to the Word of God, recognizing, however, the limitations of our knowledge. This is especially true in the case of the suffering of a Christian.

Forty years ago, fourteen-year-old Aaron Kushner died from progeria. His father, rabbi Harold Kushner, later wrote a book, which became a bestseller, called *When Bad Things happen to Good People*. In essence, Kushner argued that God is good, and is not willing for people to suffer, but that, in the end, He is unable to prevent their doing so. This problem of suffering perplexed Charles Darwin, and was a motive for his rejection of the Christian faith. In a letter to Asa Gray, Darwin candidly expressed his view on the matter. He wrote, "With respect to the theological view of the question; this is always painful to me. — I am bewildered. — I had no intention to write atheistically. But I own that I cannot see, as plainly as others do, & as I shd. wish to do, evidence of design & beneficence on all sides of us. There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent & omnipotent God would have designedly created the *Ichneumonidae* [wasp larvae] with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice. Not believing this, I see no necessity in the belief that the eye was expressly designed. On the other hand I cannot anyhow be contented to view this wonderful universe & especially the nature of man, & to conclude that everything is the result of brute force. I am inclined to look at everything as resulting from designed laws, with the details, whether good or bad, left to the working out of what we may call chance. Not that this notion *at all* satisfies me. I feel most deeply that the whole subject is too profound for the human intellect. A dog might as well speculate on the mind of Newton. — Let each man hope & believe what he can." (letter to Asa Gray, May 22, 1860) For Darwin, the fact of suffering was sufficient reason to doubt the existence of a good and almighty God. He thought his guess was as good as anyone's on the question of God's existence.

Saint James wrote in his epistle of the problem of trials, and of the response of faith. He wrote, "My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; 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 nothing. 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." (James 1:2-5)

The Christian experiences difficulties in this life, and difficulties of many kinds. He suffers as all people suffer; he is not excepted. He suffers the loss of loved ones. He suffers the loss of property. He suffers the loss of work. He suffers illness. In addition, the Christian suffers as a Christian. He suffers persecution for his Christian faith. So, he suffers the loss of loved ones, of property, and of liberty, because he is a Christian. Last

year was an specially bad year for Christians. The Center for Studies on New Religions recently reported that, last year, Christians were the religious group most persecuted. Ninety-thousand were killed, and six-hundred million were prevented from practicing their faith. Christian communities that have existed for hundreds of years, communities like the Assyrian Christians, were destroyed. Over the centuries, Christians have died, and gone to be with the Lord. Many have survived, but their lives are in ruins. Their loved ones dead; their bodies maimed; their homes destroyed. It is a great temptation for some to doubt God. It is one thing to suffer as a man; it is another to suffer as a man of God.

Death and destruction are not the only trials. Small things can be a test of one's Christian character. The common cold. The television not receiving signal during the big game. Some say that the true test of a man's character is when the internet service goes down.

No one likes to suffer. Everyone wishes for a life free from trouble, and he does what he can to make such a life for himself. There is nothing wrong with this. It is, however, impossible to avoid all difficulties. Jesus Himself said, "In the world ye shall have tribulation." (John 16:33) Jesus has taught us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation." (Matthew 6:13) Before Jesus' arrest, He Himself prayed to God, "Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done." (Luke 22:42) The experience of trials in this life is unavoidable.

If a man cannot control what happens to him, he can control how he reacts to what happen him. There is a godly crying out to God in the midst of suffering, as we read in the prophets. Habakkuk cried out to God, "O LORD, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear! *even* cry out unto thee *of* violence, and thou wilt not save!" (Habakkuk 1:2) David, and Jesus after him, cried out to God, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1; Matthew 27:46) Sadly, however, it is all too common for the Christian to murmur and complain when he suffers, as the Israelites complained against God after the Exodus. (Exodus 16)

Saint James writes that, if one does fall into temptation, he should "count it all joy." Of course, one must not deceive himself into believing that the trial itself is somehow enjoyable. He must not laugh at suffering and tragedy. Rather, he rejoices knowing what the trial will mean for his character. "The trying of your faith," Saint James writes, "worketh patience." The English word, *patience*, is derived from the Latin word for suffering. Noah Webster gave this definition of *patience*: "The suffering of afflictions, pain, toil, calamity, provocation or other evil, with a calm, unruffled temper; endurance without murmuring or fretfulness." (Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language*, 1828) The enduring of a trial is an exercise of the Christian virtue of patience.

There are various reasons for the Christian's suffering. Sometimes the Christian suffers for his sin. God chastened ancient Israel for their sins. Through the prophet Jeremiah, He said, "I have surely heard Ephraim bemoaning himself *thus*; Thou hast chastised me, and I was chastised, as a bullock unaccustomed *to the yoke*: turn thou me, and I shall be turned; for thou *art* the LORD my God." (Jeremiah 31:18) Saint Paul turned the Corinthian man over to Satan, so that the man might turn back to God. He wrote to the church at Corinth, "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." (1 Corinthians 5:4, 5) Saint Paul explained to the Hebrews that God chastens His people, not because He hates them, but because He loves them. He wrote, "For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth." (Hebrews 12:6) Jesus told the church at Laodicea, "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent." (Revelation 3:19) Just as the earthly father disciplines his child, because he loves him, and wishes for him to do right, so the Christian's heavenly father disciplines him.

Every Christian sins, and sins daily. But he confesses his sin, and God forgives him. God does not chasten him for these sins. God does, however, chasten the Christian for high-handed sin, and for impenitence. So, if a Christian suffers, he ought to examine himself, to see if he cherishes his sin, to see if he has a hard and

impenitent heart. David, when oppressed by enemies, prayed to God, “Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if *there be any* wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. (Psalm 139:23, 24) If the Christian is impenitent, then he ought simply to repent, and to ask God to forgive him. God will graciously forgive him, and will put an end to his affliction.

If the Christian suffers affliction, but is not hard-hearted, and does not cherish his sin; if his conscience is clear; then his suffering is for some other reason. He may suffer in order that he may practice patience, and, practicing patience, be perfected. He is not like rebellious Israel, or like the wicked Corinthian man; rather, he is like Job, who suffered so that his faith might be proved. God asked Satan, the Accuser, to consider the righteousness of Job. He said, “Hast thou considered my servant Job, that *there is* none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil?” (Job 1:8) Satan replied that Job only served God because God blessed him. Take everything from him, Satan, argued, and Job would curse God. So, God allowed Satan to torment Job, and destroy all that he loved, including his own children. Job responded in a godly fashion. He said, “Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.” (Job 1:21) The Scriptures tell us, “In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly.” (Job 1:22) Saint James wrote of patience of Job and the prophets in suffering: “Take, my brethren, the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience. Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy.” (James 5:10, 11) God had His reasons for allowing Job to suffer, although He did not reveal those reasons to Job. Of course, God has revealed them to us. God allowed Satan to afflict Job, so that Job's faith would be proved genuine by patiently enduring trial, and submitting to God.

Abraham is another example of a man whose great faith was proved. Abraham was a righteous man who believed God. God had greatly blessed Abraham, as he had blessed Job. Abraham believed God, but his faith had to be proved. So, God commanded him to offer his son, Isaac, as a sacrifice to God. Abraham did not waiver in his faith. Because he was prepared to do whatever God asked, even give up his own son to God, God said to him, “Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only *son* from me.” (Genesis 22:12) By Abraham's action, his faith was realized and completed. James explained, “Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect?” (James 2:21, 22)

But why should we trust God? We should trust God because He is almighty. When God revealed Himself to Abraham, He revealed Himself as the Almighty. He said, “I *am* the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect.” (Genesis 17:1) We should trust God because He is perfectly good. As Moses sang, “*He is* the Rock, his work *is* perfect: for all his ways *are* judgment: a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right *is* he.” (Deuteronomy 32:4) If God is almighty, and if He is perfectly good, then everything He does is good, and He has a good reason for everything that He does. Therefore, He is worthy of our trust. We can trust that he is willing and able to do what is right, even if it is beyond our ability to understand how it is right. We are not Stoics, who acquiesce to our circumstances, biting our tongues that would otherwise utter complaint. Rather, we joyfully endure trials, knowing that in doing so we are practicing patience, and perfecting our faith. We are to have the faith of a child, obediently submitting to the will of God, with the understanding that He knows what is best, even if we do not.

God puts the believer to the test, to prove his faith to be real and genuine. He tests his faithfulness. When he doubt the power, or the goodness, or the wisdom of God, he puts God to the test. This is a very great sin. When the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness after leaving Sinai, they arrive in place called Rephidim. The people thirsted, but there was no water there. The people chided with Moses, God's representative to the people, and they murmured against Him. So, Moses said to them, “Why chide ye with me? wherefore do ye

tempt the LORD?" (Exodus 17:2) Moses called the place *Massah*, which means, *trial*, or *temptation*, and he also named it *Meribah*, which means *chiding*, or *quarrel*. Some time later, when God made the covenant with Israel at Horeb, God told the people "Ye shall not tempt the LORD your God, as ye tempted *him* in Massah." (Deuteronomy 6:16) When the devil tempted Jesus, and told Jesus to test God's faithfulness by throwing Himself off the pinnacle of the temple, Jesus answered him, saying, "Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God." (Matthew 4:7) God tests our faithfulness; we do not test His.

It is the nature of faith, not only to believe, but to work. If the Christian suffers, especially if he suffers the loss of a loved one, it is a test of his faith. Does he love the LORD his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might? (Deuteronomy 6:5) Does he trust the Lord to do right? The one who does love the Lord with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might, trusts the Almighty God to do right, even in the midst of suffering.

Now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy; to the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. *Amen.*