

*Hardships are part of life in a fallen world. Friends and family will disappoint us at times. Circumstances at home or work won't always be pleasant. No one's immune to pain, but for the Christian, God uses the hardships of His people to accomplish His good and perfect purposes.*

*What are some of God's purposes for our trials?*

## 1) TESTING

God often uses trials to test the strength of a believer's faith. He already knows the answer, but do we? Maybe. Maybe not.

We tend to look at ourselves through a set of lenses that exaggerates reality. Trials strip us of those lenses, helping us see our faith for what it truly is or isn't.

After the Exodus, the Israelites wandered in a barren wilderness for 40 years. What little food could be grown, never could've sustained so many people. They were helpless to survive. God provided by sending manna and quail, but would they trust Him? They didn't. Rather than trust the Lord to provide more, some of the people tried to hoard it (Ex 16:4, 19-20). They worried they would starve if they didn't take matters into their own hands.

A more positive example of God's testing would be Habakkuk. He foretold the horrific fall of Jerusalem (586 BC), and yet, the prophet determined to rejoice in the Lord (Hab 3:17-18).

*Habakkuk 3:17-18—"Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation."*

The world was going to get worse—much worse. Regardless of the pain that would fall upon a future generation, Habakkuk chose to trust God: He chose to walk by faith even as he considered God's judgment (Hab 2:4).

## 2) REFINING

The same fire that destroys wood purifies gold. When gold is heated to a liquid, impurities rise to the surface and can be removed. With each successive heating, the gold only becomes purer and increases in value. This is the idea Peter had in mind with trials (1 Pet 1:6-7).

When God applies heat to our lives, He brings to the surface what lays deep within our heart. Perhaps there's bitterness, anger, self-pity, hatred, or slander that's buried within. It's easy to hide these under a smile when life is easy, but what about when life is hard? Not so much. These qualities rise to the surface, and that's not a bad thing. By seeing what's in our own heart, we can confess our sins to the Lord, and live in freedom.

Without being refined, would Moses have ever grown to lead Israel out of Egypt? Would David have grown to trust the Lord so deeply had it not been for Saul? What can be said of Peter or the other disciples? In all cases, God used trials to refine these men that each would be more useful. As He removed dross from their lives, so He continues with this same method today.

## 3) HUMBLING

"Pride is spiritual drunkenness." So said the puritan, Thomas Watson. We have no problem thinking well of ourselves. We like to believe all the blessings in life are the result of our good planning, good grades, or good work ethic.

Perhaps it's a recently earned academic degree? It's easy to forget that God gave you the intellect, finances, and time to earn it. If it's an election you recently won, it's easy to pride yourself in a stellar campaign as if God had little to do with it. We even pat ourselves on the back for raising well-behaved children. We love to take credit.

King Nebuchadnezzar ruled the world's most powerful empire for a time, and while boasting of his greatness, the Lord struck him with insanity. This great king acted like an animal until the Lord restored his mind seven years later. Nebuchadnezzar was completely humbled and praised God for restoring him (Dan 4:29-37). Truly, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (Jas 4:6).

# Reasons for Trials

---

Like Nebuchadnezzar, the more good things we receive in life, the more tempted we are to take credit for them. Paul understood and said the Lord continually tried him to keep him humble (2 Cor 12:7). The Lord delights in humility (Isa 66:1-2), and He often uses trials to produce it. Humility glorifies Him; it's also what's best for us.

## 4) REFOCUSING

God sent the prophet Jonah as a missionary to the city of Nineveh... and Jonah didn't want to go. He was filled with hatred and actually *wanted* the Ninevites destroyed (Jonah 1-4). To refocus Jonah, the Lord sent a great fish to swallow him. It's a radical method, but the result was a more obedient prophet. Jonah went, the city listened to him, and many turned to God in repentance.

It's possible for a Christian to have a heart as rebellious as Jonah. Perhaps it's not filled with hatred, but filled with some other ungodly desire. The desire for a more exciting career, better behaved children, or a spouse who listens more intently—these aren't necessarily bad desires. Yet, a good desire becomes a bad desire when it becomes a controlling desire. The desire for excitement isn't wrong until it takes control of one's heart. The same is true of many other desires in life.

Jonah's desire to see his enemies die wasn't a good desire, and he let that desire permeate his heart. Down a miserable path he went until the Lord refocused him. How gracious of God to do this. Rather than leave Jonah in his rebellion, the Lord loved the prophet enough to pursue him (cf. Amos 4:6-13).

The author of Hebrews teaches that all who belong to God will be disciplined (Heb 12:5-11). Just like a child, our hearts are prone to wander. Sometimes we need the hand of our faithful God to bring us back to the light.

## 5) UNDERSTANDING OTHERS

Trials help God's people understand the trials of others. Those who have experienced the pain of betrayal or the disappointment of a miscarriage personally understand these. The believer who arrives on the other side of pain with a stronger faith has a tremendous amount of hope to offer others.

The trials and temptations of Jesus were used for this purpose. Tried in every way common to man (Heb 2:18, 4:15-16), He knows what it means to be rejected. He has experienced poverty and has been tempted to do wrong.

God became like us in every way, which means when we approach Him in prayer with a heavy heart, He knows what it's like. We have a God who can sympathize with our weaknesses, because He became weak Himself.

Being able to identify with and enter into another's pain is a gift. We become an instrument God can use for a specific purpose in another person's life. How well we go through a trial effects how useful our help might be to another.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

In the book of James, we're urged to have the wisdom to see the heavenly picture. Trials are part of life, and with wisdom it's possible to endure a trial with joy (Jas 1:1-12). The big picture in the midst of pain is that God is at work using something unpleasant to produce something good.

God may be testing your faith to show you what it's truly made of. He may be using a trial to refine, humble, refocus, or prepare you. In any case, your life hasn't been left to chance. There's a good God ever at work in the highs and lows His people encounter, and He has a purpose in it all.

*Deep in unfathomable mines  
Of never failing skill  
He treasures up His bright designs  
And works His sovereign will.*

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
But trust Him for His grace;  
Behind a frowning providence  
He hides a smiling face.*

— William Cowper —