

## HOW GOD STRENGTHENS OUR FAITH

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2 Timothy 3: 10-17  
1 Peter 4: 12-19

Many of you know that my dad died in August of this year. I still feel that loss. I think about him every day. I worry about how my mom is doing without him. I wish I could have spent more time with him over the past few years. There are things I wanted to say to him and should have said to him that I didn't get a chance to say.

But my dad's death wasn't the hardest part for my family and me. Dad was diagnosed with an unidentified form of cancer early in August, at age 86. He died, after experiencing surprisingly little pain, about two weeks later. The Lord's mercy and grace were fully evident to us throughout those final days. The real trial, for us and for him, happened over the five years leading up to that time as dad gradually lost his short-term memory, and with it, his enthusiasm for most of his earthly amusements.

There were many exquisite moments when dad unintentionally provided us with comic relief. I think of the time a year ago when he was in the hospital recovering from surgery on his leg. Thinking the nursing assistant was a table server and that he was at the Valley Hunt Club, dad told him, "I'll have a Manhattan."

I think of the time after the hospice workers had set up the hospital bed at my dad and mom's house, and a non-nonsense-looking woman in her late sixties showed up at their door. "Hi, I'm the shower girl," she told my mom, meaning of course that she was there to help my dad take a shower. Mom hesitated, contemplating her options then brought the woman to dad's bedside. "Larry, this is Angie," she said, struggling with all her might to stifle her laughter. "She's here to help you take a shower."

After a pause, dad said, "I think I'll pass" – which he did, thankfully, only a few days later.

Dad lived a rich, full life as a disciple of Jesus. The real trial wasn't releasing him into God's arms. It was watching him get frustrated and angry, week after week, because he couldn't keep up with our dinner table conversations. And seeing his embarrassment when he couldn't come up with a close friend's name. And worrying that this person who all my life had been a fountain of strength, wisdom and encouragement would end up in nursing home.

Peter tells us we shouldn't be surprised about the fiery ordeals that come our way. Every season of life brings its own batch of sorrows. Older people often envy youth, and what they see as their care-free existence. But that's only because they've forgotten the many heartaches they experienced when they were kids. As we read in the book of Job, "Mortals, born of woman, are of few days and full of trouble" (Job 14: 1). Though some of us clearly suffer more than others, no one is exempt from trouble. No one gets a free pass.

God's Word gives us a lot of insight into our suffering. It reveals that our earthly life is a test, a preparation for the life that is to come. It reminds us again and again that if we decide to follow Jesus, we should be prepared to suffer in this life as he did. Yet the Bible also assures us that God brings good out of our suffering. That's the miracle of grace that he performs every day. We cry out to God from the hole we've fallen into, sometimes in utter desperation. And as God's Spirit meets us there – whether or not he pulls us out – he changes us from the inside out. He causes us to grow in the image of Christ and in our service to Christ.

Paul explains how the process works in Romans, chapter 5:

[W]e glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

- Romans 5: 3-5

The writer of Hebrews is even more direct. The discipline that he refers to in this verse is the suffering that comes from trouble:

No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

- Hebrews 12:11

Some of you college student just finished your final exams. You spent one sleep-deprived week freaking out, reading all the books you were supposed to be reading over the past three months. Finals week is what many of us have in mind when we think about being tested and disciplined by God. Yet the analogy is weak. It doesn't capture what's really at stake in our walk with Jesus. Most of you students are going to forget all about the classes you just suffered through. They're going to have little or no impact on your long-term future.

A better analogy for Christian discipleship would be what happens after you sign up to be a Marine and they send you to Camp Pendleton. And what happens later when they send you overseas and there are real bad guys shooting at you with real guns. The point is that when we give our lives to Christ, we become soldiers in his army. And we shouldn't be surprised when we find ourselves face-to-face with enemies who want to kill us. As Peter says in the passage we'll look at next week, "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (5: 8).

Many people are turned aside once they realize what's really at stake for the Christian. They want an easy path, not one that's steep and narrow. They want a God who protects them from suffering, not one that uses suffering to accomplish his goals. They're the people that Peter has in mind – the ones who are surprised by trouble, who see suffering as something strange and unnatural.

The Bible begins with the basic insight that all growth and all progress in the life of the spirit come through fire and struggle. That foundational truth is captured Isaiah chapter 48, verse 10, where God declares:

“I have refined you though not as silver. I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.”

In story after story in the Bible, we meet people who yearn to be rescued from their suffering and heartache, but aren't. At least not according to the timetable that they would prefer. We meet prophets who do the right thing and are persecuted for it. We meet disciples who are walking with God and still get beaten down and smacked around. We also meet a man sent from heaven, Jesus Christ, who never sinned, and always obeyed his Father, who nevertheless had to face fiery ordeals in order to fulfill his purpose.

The writer of Hebrews reveals to us why the Lord was afflicted with trials:

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death... Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him...

The crucial insight, from start to finish, is that God uses suffering to purify us, and turn us into people who resemble him. If that holds true for Jesus, God's only begotten Son, it certainly holds true for wayward rebels like us.

I read about an old silversmith who was once asked, “How do you know when the impurities are burned away and the silver is ready?” He replied, “When I can see my reflection in the silver.” Likewise, God knows the impurities have been burned away in our lives when he can see his reflection in us.

Keeping these foundational truths in mind, let's look at our own experience of suffering. How is God using our troubles, right now, to strengthen our faith and shape us in the character of Jesus?

What we notice, as soon as we start digging, is that God is working in many ways and on many levels.

To take the most obvious example, some of our suffering is caused by our own bad choices. God often allows us to suffer the consequences of our disobedience. One person drinks like a fish, year after year, and becomes a slave to alcohol. Another person cheats on his wife, and she finds out, and now she and the kids don't want anything to do with him. Another fudges some numbers at work, and gets caught, and loses her job and goes to prison.

Sometimes we need to claim responsibility for our troubles. Sometimes we need to get down on our knees and confess our sin before God, and acknowledge that our suffering is well-deserved. At the same time, we need to be careful about identifying God as the direct cause of our suffering. Very often, God

doesn't have to punish us; he can rely on the universe he created to do that work for him. Because when we break the moral law that governs the universe, the consequences can be devastating. Alcohol poisons the body and leads to addiction, which leads to unemployment, jacked up relationships, and an early death. Adultery leads to lying, a loss of trust, the destruction of the family, and feelings of guilt and self-loathing. Larceny leads to a criminal probe, massive legal fees, the ruin of one's reputation and time behind bars.

When we blow it, and we disrespect the order and balance of God's world, God uses our circumstances to drive us to our knees. But God's desire for us, in those instances, isn't that we would pay for our sins eternally in hell. His desire is that we would come to our senses, turn to Christ in faith, and let him have his way in us.

It might sound like I'm saying that God never punishes us, but that's not the point. That point is that God's *purpose* in punishing us in this life is always to save us. As Paul declares in 1 Timothy, God "wants all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth" (2: 4). If God allows us to suffer the consequences of our poor choices, it's because he loves us and wants us to find new life in him. And if God decides instead to reach down from heaven and smack us with his own invisible hand, once again, it's because he loves us and wants us to find new life in him. Our God isn't bloodthirsty. He derives no satisfaction in seeing us suffer. He uses punishment as an instrument of redemption.

We sometimes speak of punishment and discipline as if they were the same thing, but they're not. It's important to realize that the fact that we're suffering doesn't necessarily mean that we've blown it and we're getting our just desserts. Most of the time, God uses trouble in our life to build our character and deepen our faith. When he does that, he's disciplining us. He's allowing us to suffer for a good purpose. So the appropriate response to that kind of trouble is to ask, "What's God trying to teach me through this ordeal? What aspect of my character, or my discipleship, is being tested right now?"

Lots of parents today struggle with discipline issues. Probably none of you – but I mean parents out there in the world. They want to raise their kids to be polite, but it doesn't feel right to them to combat rudeness with sharp words or with consequences that might lead to a temper tantrum. They don't want to counter disrespect with anything that their kids might think is disrespectful. So their polite requests for polite words are generally ignored. And they can't imagine where in the world their daughter got that sharp tongue of hers.

Similar dilemmas arise with other kinds of misbehavior. Their little angel shoves another kid to the ground for the fifth or sixth time. Mom and dad are upset, but they don't want to over-react so they decide to have a serious talk. For the fifth or sixth time. They wait for a moment of calm. They sit down and remind the boy how good and kind and wonderful he is. Then they explain, in measured, respectful tones, why shoving other people is inappropriate.

Sadly, the bullying behavior just gets worse. What mom and dad don't understand is that their second-grader knows they're afraid of him. He knows they aren't going to do anything to him that he might

interpret as bullying. He knows they aren't going to risk making him cry because they want him to *like* them. And as he gets older, he learns to use tantrums and emotional intimidation to get his way.

Our Father in Heaven doesn't have a discipline problem. We complain to him all the time about our fiery ordeals. We accuse him of being unfair and of expecting too much of us. But our attempts to manipulate him never work. He knows what we need better than we do. His dream for our lives far exceeds anything we could imagine. And he knows we'll realize that dream only by pushing the limits of what we think is possible. We'll have to suffer in ways that cause us to wonder if God has abandoned us, or if he even exists. But God takes that risk knowing that "suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope" (Romans 5: 3-4).

Here's the main point. Like all good parents, God grieves with us when we suffer. But as we learn to look at ourselves through God's eyes, it becomes ever more apparent why our suffering is both necessary and good. God loves us too much to stop disciplining us. He loves us way too much to give in to our demands, and allow us to remain prisoners to sin and death. It's a lot easier to accept our suffering, and even to rejoice in the midst of it, when we understand this about God. I love the way George MacDonald makes the point [PAPER]:

Many a man's work must be burned, that by the very burning he might be saved... [And] if still he clings to that which can be burned, the burning goes deeper and deeper still into his bosom until it reaches the roots of the falsehood that enslaves him... The one who loves God, and is not yet pure, welcomes the burning of God.

- From *Discovering the Character of God*, edited by Michael Phillips, Bethany House, 1989, chapter 25

The take-away lesson here is that, instead of fighting God's work of disciplining us, we should give thanks for it, and let God's joy rise up inside us. Peter goes so far as to say we should rejoice when we suffer for following Jesus. Notice that he doesn't say we should be thankful for our troubles, and welcome them. When we lose our job, or we get cancer, or our house burns down we don't say, "Thanks, God – it's so awesome that you decided to test me like this!" That wouldn't make sense. Peter is telling us instead to rejoice and give thanks *as* we suffer. We have to find God's joy in the midst of our trials if we want to learn to live by faith.

Let's look, finally, at how God disciplines us on a daily basis. It's helpful to think in terms of three broad categories. If you're seeking God's heart, you'll experience these three forms of discipline every week if not every *day* of your life.

First, God disciplines us through his Word. He makes demands on us in the Bible that seem unreasonable, and sometimes all but impossible. For example, the Lord tells us not to worry about anything. Anybody struggle with that one? He also commands us to love our enemies and forgive those who hurt us. Paul tells us to give thanks in every circumstance. And to save sex for marriage.

These are huge demands that often make us say, “Hold on, God, you’re expecting way more than I can deliver.” But those demands are there to discipline us. God sets the bar high not to discourage us, but so we’ll look to him for help. He wants us take a deep breath and ask, “Who am I going to believe? Who am I going to trust? Am I going to walk away from this challenge, and follow the crowd, and do what seems convenient? Or am I going to take a leap, and attempt to do what I know in my heart is right?”

The Bible is full of examples where God told people to do things that didn’t make a bit of sense to them, and they did it anyway. My favorite one is the story of Noah. Here’s a guy who lives in the middle of a desert, who’s told to build a gigantic boat to get ready for a flood. Would you do that? Would you obey God if the thing he asked you to do seemed ridiculous? Noah did. As the Bible says, “By faith, Noah built an ark.”

The lesson for us is that if we want to grow as disciples we have to work hard at being obedient. We have to obey even when we don’t fully understand God’s demands. We have to obey the clear commandments that we find in the Bible.

The first way that God disciplines us is through his Word. And the second is through our wallets. God tests us continually in this very sensitive area of discipleship. Rick Warren puts it like this: “God determines how much he can bless my life by how faithful I am with what he’s put in my hands.”

We talked a lot about this last month. The takeaway message today is that God tests our faith by entrusting us with money. Am I organizing my finances with his kingdom in mind? Am I giving generously to fund God’s work? Am I following the money guidelines that God has established in the Bible? Those questions ought to be ringing in our heads every time we pull out our wallet.

God disciplines us through his Word, and through our wallets. And lastly, he disciplines us by making us wait. There’s never a time in life when we’re not waiting for something. When we’re single we wait for God to provide us with the perfect spouse. When we’re married, many of us wait for our marriages to get better. Some of us are waiting for our health to return. Others are waiting for the right job. Or to hear from the colleges we’ve applied to.

God disciplines us through delays. Isaiah says, “God acts on behalf of those who wait for him” (64: 4). God doesn’t work on our timetable. He does things according to his agenda and his schedule. And a central question for every disciple is whether we’re on board with that. Are we going to wait for him, or are we going to try to move ahead without him.

The best Old Testament example of delays is the Exodus. After leading the Hebrew people out Egypt, where they had been suffering in bondage for many generations, he kept them for 40 years in the Sinai wilderness. They were only a few weeks’ journey from the Promised Land, but God delayed their entry for what seemed to them like an eternity. Throughout that time they learned discipline and patience as God ordered their life, gave them a new set of laws and re-established his covenant with them.

Delays are painful. When I'm delayed at the Post Office or on the freeway I sometimes want to scream. But God uses delays to slow us down and make us ask important questions: Am I heading the right direction? Do I have my priorities straight? Is my heart in tune with God's heart or am I trying to get out in front of him?

God uses many strategies to strengthen our faith. Most of them aren't what we would choose for ourselves, but God knows what he's doing. He knows we need to experience hardship, pain and frustration in order to grow. And if we sometimes feel he's giving us more than our fair share, it's only because he loves us.