

A FEW THOUGHTS ABOUT GOD'S PURPOSE, AND DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES

We all have to go through trials and difficult circumstances, at various times in our lives. Sometimes these problems are nothing more than a temporary distraction, but at other times, they seem to go on with no end in sight.

I have experienced many kinds of trials, and have had many opportunities to reflect on various things the Scriptures say about them. I will mention some of these things below, focusing mostly on verses which I found helpful in dealing with long-term difficulties - since these are the types of problems tend to be the most painful.

Romans 8:28 And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.

I start with this verse, because it summarizes the ultimate goal of everything that happens in our lives, if we belong to God. God uses *all things*, both good and bad, to accomplish good. Some of this good may be experienced in this present life; some of it will not become evident until later. This verse does *not* guarantee that everything in life will be *pleasant*, but it does guarantee that the ultimate outcome will be good. God's ultimate goal is to make us like Christ (verse 29).

1 Peter 1:6-7 So be truly glad! There is wonderful joy ahead, even though it is necessary for you to endure many trials for a while. These trials are only to test your faith, to show that it is strong and pure. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold - and your faith is far more precious to God than mere gold. So if your faith remains strong after being tried by fiery trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world.

We can be confident that there is *meaning and purpose* in the trials and disappointments we have. There is a *hope*, something we can confidently look forward to. As we go through these trials, we can remain confident that God will use them for our good. This means they *cannot* have a permanent negative effect on us! People who do *not* love God will also have trials, but they do not have this hope. Even though they may confidently *claim* to have hope, and may even claim to be "saved," their hope will fail them. They will be like a person reaching out for a spider's web, when trying to keep from falling off a cliff.

Psalm 73:26 My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak, but God remains the strength of my heart; he is mine forever.

I came across this verse many years ago, at a time I was being tested more severely than any other time in my life. This verse tells me that no matter what happens to us, we will still have God, and we will have him *forever*. The rest of Psalm 73 is a look at the contrast between the ungodly (who were prospering and enjoying life) and the psalmist (who was suffering and needy). The writer of this psalm had almost reached the foolish conclusion that there was no value in trusting God - until he focused on the final outcome. No matter how bad things might be at the present, his problems would eventually come to an end. In contrast, even if the ungodly prosper right now, their final destiny will be *forever* horrible.

Here is another passage, in which the apostle Paul focuses on his own attitude:

Philippians 4:12-13 I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. For I can do everything with the help of Christ who gives me the strength I need.

Many people quote verse 13, and ignore verse 12. They try to use verse 13 (which says, "I can do everything") to *demand* that God give them prosperity and happiness, and anything else they may want. They ignore the fact that, though verse 12 says that Paul sometimes did have plenty, it also says there were other times he had almost nothing. Paul did not use verse 13, to try to "force" God into gratifying all his self-centered desires. Rather, he was willing to live under any circumstances he may find himself in. Some translations say he was *content* to live in both types of circumstances. In contrast, many people who use verse 13 (and ignore verse 12) are definitely *not* content when they are in need!

How could Paul be content when he was in needy circumstances? This verse tells us that it was *God* who gave him strength to be so. We, too, can learn to live under any circumstances, when we are empowered by *God's* strength.

Paul's life demonstrated that he meant what he said. When he spoke, it wasn't mere "pep talk" or empty words. Paul probably suffered more than any of us will ever suffer.

2 Corinthians 4:8-10 We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed and broken. We are perplexed, but we don't give up and quit. We are hunted down, but God never abandons us. We get knocked down, but we get up again and keep going. Through suffering, these bodies of ours constantly share in the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be seen in our bodies.

These verses focus on the stressful pressures which were a constant part of Paul's life. If he had attempted to rely on his own strength, in dealing with these things, he would have never survived; the stress would have destroyed him. However, God had put the "light" of salvation into Paul's heart. This enabled him to not give-up, but to focus on *God's* mercy and strength. And because he did focus on God's mercy and strength, that light was able to radiate out for others to see - and to be encouraged by it (see 2 Corinthians 1:3-7).

2 Corinthians 4:7 But this precious treasure - this light and power that now shine within us - is held in perishable containers, that is, in our weak bodies. So everyone can see that our glorious power is from God and is not our own.

Paul's own weaknesses only proved that this "light" was not of human origin. It was like a treasure being stored in a clay pot. (The contrast between the treasure and the clay pot enhances the beauty of the treasure.) It is the same way with the power of God, when his power is displayed in the life of a weak person.

Many people are repelled by the idea that Paul was a weak person. Paul, however, knew he was weak, and openly admitted it. *That is why God was able to accomplish so many powerful things through him.*

Paul also tells us about some of the specific types of things he suffered. He mentions them because some false apostles had begun to boast that they were better than Paul. Rather than responding the way a person of the *world* might respond, by saying something like, "I'm more spiritual," he responded by focusing on his weaknesses - which directs our focus to God's strength, rather than to Paul.

2 Corinthians 11:23-29 They say they serve Christ? I know I sound like a madman, but I have served him far more! I have worked harder, been put in jail more often, been whipped times without number, and faced death again and again. Five different times the Jews gave me thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea. I have traveled many weary miles. I have faced danger from flooded rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the stormy seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be Christians but are not. I have lived with weariness and pain and sleepless nights. Often I have been hungry and thirsty and have gone without food. Often I have shivered with cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm. Then, besides all this, I have the daily burden of how the churches are getting along. Who is weak without my feeling that weakness? Who is led astray, and I do not burn with anger?

Paul wanted to talk about Jesus, not about himself. But because of the attacks of his enemies, he was "forced" to talk about himself - though he considered himself to be "like a madman" for doing so. Of course, God used Paul's "forced" response to accomplish good - even for *us!* Today, we can read these things and realize that when *we* endure trials, God can use *us*, too!

Paul did not enjoy his trials. They weren't *pleasant!* But he accepted them as the way God's power could be best displayed. He did, on one occasion, ask God to take away something that he described as "a thorn in the flesh" (2 Corinthians 12:7). However, God showed him a better way:

2 Corinthians 12:8-10 Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. Each time he said, "My gracious favor is all you need. My power works best in your weakness." So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may work through me. Since I know it is all for Christ's good, I am quite content with my weaknesses and with insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

God displayed his power through Paul's weakness. Once Paul understood this, he was satisfied. He was content, even in this type of situation, because his greatest desire was to glorify God.

We should always have a desire to live in a way that brings glory and honor to God - not just when we *aren't* suffering, but also when we *are*. It seems that many of the Scripture passages that focus on the issue of suffering tell us that we should respond to suffering in a way that brings honor and glory to God. (This is a frequent theme. Maybe it is because we need an extra reminder, when circumstances are difficult!)

In many of the verses about suffering, there is a second focus - one that may be a bit surprising, but which is equally true: The Bible tells us that, if we belong to Jesus, we are *united with him*. Because of this, our suffering is, in many respects, considered a *sharing of Christ's sufferings*. Even more amazing is this: Since we are sharing in his *sufferings* (and that brings honor and glory to him), we will also share in his *glory!* Quite clearly, our suffering is not going to be a waste of our lives! It is our duty to glorify *God* when we suffer, and one day God will glorify *us* - all because we are united with Christ. God has promised it!

1 Peter 4:13 But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

Romans 8:17-18 And since we are his children, we will share his treasures - for everything God gives to his Son, Christ, is ours, too. But if we are to share his glory, we must also share his suffering. Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will give us later.

Many people think that God should *prevent* temptations and trials from coming into our lives. This type of thinking is backwards, for ultimately, God is *not* the one to blame for our problems. *We*, the human race, are the ones who chose to sin. *We*, the human race, brought it upon ourselves. And each time we personally choose to sin, we are expressing our agreement and solidarity with those who have gone before us, who also chose to sin.

The actual issue is *not* what type of circumstances we will have in our lives. Rather, it is how we will choose to respond to them. Trials and temptations will come our way, but will we surrender to them, or remain steadfast in doing what is right? We have no legitimate reason to give-up and yield to those trials and temptations, for God has promised to help us endure and overcome them.

1 Corinthians 10:13 But remember that the temptations that come into your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will keep the temptation from becoming so strong that you can't stand up against it. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you will not give in to it.

When we read verses such as this, we should avoid false expectations. Note that God doesn't promise to *take away* the trials, but to provide a way that we can *stand up* under their pressure, and get through them. He is faithful; the only question is whether or not we will be willing to accept his help! Once we begin to *ignore* God's help, the temptation may become too strong to resist - but it won't be God's fault.

One of the books in the Old Testament is about a man named Job. This man was blameless and innocent of any serious wrongdoing, but he suffered worse circumstances in his life, than any of us ever will. Many things in the book of Job have strongly influenced my perspective on the issue of suffering, but there are two passages I want to mention right now.

Job 17:9 The righteous will move onward and forward, and those with pure hearts will become stronger and stronger.

Some people use the major trials of life as an excuse for turning against God. This passage, however, suggests to me that it is *not* that such people have *lost* trust in God, but that they *never had a genuine trust, to start with*. This verse tells me that, though the person who trusts God may become very upset with what is happening, he will cling tenaciously to his righteous ways. He will continue to trust God.

The second passage focuses on the issue of integrity. In many types of trials, we may find ourselves tempted to compromise our integrity, or to do things that we know are wrong, in order to ease the pressure of the trial. Job, for instance had been tested with the choices to either "curse God and die" (Job 2:9-10) or to lie about himself - to pretend that he *had* done something wrong (which he hadn't done) and to pretend to "repent," in an attempt to gain God's (or at least his friends') approval. Instead, he chose to maintain his integrity, come what may. In this matter, the way he reacted is a worthy example for all of us to follow.

Job 27:3-6 As long as I live, while I have breath from God, my lips will speak no evil, and my tongue will speak no lies. I will never concede that you are right; until I die, I will defend my innocence. I will maintain my innocence without wavering. My conscience is clear for as long as I live.

A different translation of verse 5 brings out the concept of integrity a little clearer:

Job 27:5 I will never admit you are in the right; till I die, I will not deny my integrity.

Both of these translations are accurate - it's just that, when translating from a different language, there are often different words that can be used to convey the intended meaning. Either way, Job could say this, because he was truly innocent of the accusations his friends were making.

Here is one last verse - one that focuses on the *attitude* we should have. This is a good attitude to have at *all* times - not only when we are enduring trials, but also when we aren't.

1 Peter 5:6 Humble yourselves under the mighty power of God, and in his good time he will honor you.

Our attitude - whether we are humble or proud - will influence the final outcome of everything that happens in our lives. God has guaranteed that he *will* honor those who humble themselves under his mighty power. We need to remember, however, that the phrase "in his good time" does *not* mean "when *we* want it." We tend to get impatient and unwilling to let God determine when the best time is. Instead, we should focus on *our* responsibility to be patient. We should learn to trust God... and let *him* "worry" about when "his good time" will come to pass.

These are just a few of the many passages in Scripture, which focus on this topic. I'm sure you can find more, without too much effort. But even without doing so, these few verses are sufficient to show how we should respond. I hope you are willing to consider these things and to let them influence your life.

If I were to summarize my own response to finding myself in difficult situations that I could not escape, this would be my conclusion: Everyone experiences trials of one kind or another. However, for we who belong to God, God allows us to be where we are, in order to accomplish good in us and to accomplish good in the lives of others, through us. Learning this *and living it* - takes time, but I am trying to do so. Sometimes, when the trials become very wearisome, it becomes more difficult for me to accept this, but I am accepting it more than I used to.

I hope that you also can learn and accept these things, if you haven't done so already. I hope that, when trials come your way, you will focus on the goodness of God and will not give-up. Those who patiently endure the trials they must experience, and who keep their focus on God, have something wonderful to look forward to. It is my desire for you to have this confident hope that belongs to those who love God.

A MINOR TRIAL OF LIFE

There are many different types of trials and difficult circumstances. Some are major issues, but (we can be thankful) many of are minor, in comparison.

I am going through a trial right now! You see, I've quoted "too many" Bible verses in the above article. The copyright restrictions say that the verses I quote can be no more than 25% of the total text. At the end of the above article, I am at 27.6% (if I include the words of the copyright notice)! I guess this means that, if I were to publish it as it stands, the "copyright police" would come knocking down my door at midnight and take me away. For the sake of 2.6%, I'd probably never be seen again!

What a horrible dilemma! Should I just publish it anyway, and hope that nobody notices? Of course not - that would be a denial of the very things I stand for! Should I change to another translation? Some of them also have a 25% limit. Others are archaic or grammatically poor. Besides, I already changed translations once!

I originally wrote the above article as part of a letter to someone who was experiencing trials. I wasn't concerned about copyright issues on the internet, since putting the article on the web wasn't on my mind! Unfortunately, I happened to use a translation that allows people to put only 500 verses on the internet! Yes, that's for real! I could write 50 different articles with 10 verses each, but as soon as I wrote article #51, with one more verse in it (bringing the total to 501), I would be in violation of the copyright restrictions - even if I placed it on a different website! So I rewrote the article with what I thought would be a good translation, and only later discovered the issue of "too much Bible."

While puzzling over the issue, suddenly, I got this brilliant idea! What if I wrote about this "trial" and added it to the end of my original article? Maybe I could knock the percentage down to below 25%. Of course, I'd still have to be careful... What if the "copyright police" counts words differently than I do? How does he count numbers? Is "25%" one word, or three ("twenty five percent")? Do one-letter words count as much as ten-letter words? At the end of the previous paragraph, my word processor said I still needed 15 more words (based on comparing the words in the total article to the number of words in the Bible verses themselves). So by the end of this paragraph, I'll be reasonably safe!

But for an extra margin of safety, I'll attach an additional copyright notice, applicable only to this addition. That will give me a couple extra words. But don't worry... if you want to copy this article, go ahead and do so. I WON'T send the "copyright police" after you!

So I close these added paragraphs with "the moral of the story": THANK GOD THAT MOST OF THE "TRIALS OF LIFE" ARE RELATIVELY MINOR!

[P.S. - If you *do* make copies, please don't sell them or claim that you wrote the article, or make a bunch of changes, or anything else like that! That's not asking too much, is it?]

NOTE - AN UPDATE ABOUT THIS "MINOR TRIAL OF LIFE"

After two months of correspondence with the copyright holders for the original translation, they changed their position on this issue of "500 total verses on the internet." If I had individual "stand alone" articles (which I do), then I could apply the "500 verses / 25%" restriction to each article *separately*. But since I had already changed translations for this article, I didn't want to take the additional time to "unchange" it. (But at least their change in position will help me in *future* things I write!)