



The gospel of God's providence

Living in a fallen and sinful world, Christians are not exempt from experiencing trials and affliction. In fact, struggles and troubles are never far away. Throughout history many believers have cried out to God, expressing the same kind of sentiment articulated in Psalm 25:16-18,

"Turn Yourself to me, and have mercy on me, for I am desolate and afflicted. The troubles of my heart have enlarged; bring me out of my distresses! Look on my affliction and my pain, and forgive all my sins."

Facing adversity

Life isn't smooth sailing. As someone once wrote, "God promises a safe landing but not a calm passage." Adversity and trials frequently break the pattern of tranquility and threaten to take away joy and happiness. No child of God escapes trouble and affliction. The apostle Paul speaks about how he was afflicted in every way, perplexed, persecuted, struck down, always being given up to death for Christ's sake (2 Corinthians 4:8-11). Even our Lord Jesus Christ was confronted with many struggles and adversity during his earthly ministry. There were times when his human spirit was greatly troubled.

Adversity can come upon us very quickly. Our whole life can be changed in a matter of seconds. An earthquake, tornado or fire can destroy our homes with lightning speed. It only has to take one trip to the doctor to find out we are dying or suffering of an incurable disease. One controversy in the church has the potential to tear families and friends apart. A car accident can handicap us for the rest of our life, or result in the trauma that follows when a loved one passes away. One phone call can shake up all our securities.

Trials and adversity have various forms (James 1:4). Your adversity may be a struggle with health problems or financial difficulties. It may be a matter of coming to grips with being single, childless, or with the amount of children God has granted to you. You may struggle with accepting the Lord's will when loved ones stray or do not know the Lord. Adversity can come upon us in the form of disappointments, frustrations, misunderstandings, unfulfilled dreams, unmet expectations, hurtful slander, tremendous loss, loneliness, fear, criticism or conflict. We shouldn't think adversity and trials are totally meaningless and accomplish nothing but hardship. Every time we come through adversity we are established and strengthened in the faith.

Taking comfort in God's providence

Adversity and trials can be excruciatingly difficult and cause us much sorrow and pain. Yet knowledge of God's providence helps us through them. The Belgic Confession contains this beautiful statement in article 13:

This doctrine gives us unspeakable consolation, for we learn thereby that nothing can happen to us by chance, but only by the direction of our gracious heavenly Father. He watches over us with fatherly care, keeping all creatures so under his power that not one hair of our head – for they are all numbered – nor one sparrow can fall to the ground without the will of our Father (Matthew 10:29, 30). In this we trust, because we know that He holds in check the devil and all our enemies so that they cannot hurt us without his permission or will.

The Heidelberg Catechism speaks the same language of faith in Lord's Day 10. Since God upholds his creation by his providence, and so governs the world that nothing happens by chance,

we can be patient in adversity. *“For all creatures are so completely in his hand that without his will they cannot so much as move.”* All things happen by God’s direction, by the providence of our wise and all-knowing God. Nothing befalls us by chance or “just happens.” God’s providence is at work in events throughout the day, including those circumstances that cause us stress, anxiety, grief and pain. The LORD will cause all things to work together for the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28).

Patience in adversity

Confessing God’s providence we are to be patient in adversity and bide the Lord’s time. This is something we need to learn. For it’s so ingrained in us to want immediate answers to all our questions.

David expresses beautifully how a trial tested his faith and produced patience. As he proclaims in Psalm 40:1-2, *“I waited patiently for the LORD; and He inclined to me and heard my cry. He also brought me up out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my steps.”* The Lord tests our faith to produce greater patience for greater service.

Adversity, patience and Job

The Old Testament gives us two beautiful examples of patience in adversity and trust in God’s providence. The first is from the book of Job. Job was blameless and upright. He sought to serve the Lord in everything he did. He was severely tested when his children and his possessions were taken from him. His own wife turned against him and suggested he curse God and die. But Job remained steadfast. In his adversity and sorrow he praised the name of the Lord. He said, *“Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD”* (Job 1:21). Later, as he sat out on the garbage heap, afflicted with sores and totally misunderstood by his friends he was extremely distraught and troubled. Nevertheless, looking beyond the trial he breaks forth and sings of his Redeemer, *“For I know that my Redeemer lives, and he shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another”* (Job 19:25-27).

Not every word and phrase Job uttered manifested a complete or perfect trust in God’s providence. At times Job verbalized his frustration and disputed the Lord’s actions. At the end of the book, Job is made aware that he said too much. Through a series of questions the Lord challenges Job to note his providential care and government over all creatures. The Lord rules, upholds and governs his creation by the hand of his providence. God’s children must accept this in faith – also when struck by adversity (see Job 38-40).

Adversity and joy

The second example is from the prophecy of Habakkuk. The prophet is troubled by the condition of God’s people. He cries out to the Lord in his affliction and confesses, *“Though the fig tree may not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines; though the labour of the olive may fail and the fields yield no food; though the flock may be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls...”* – and who would not be inclined to panic and become desperate in such a situation – but the prophet continues, *“Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation.”* In his affliction Habakkuk has learned,

“The LORD God is my strength; He will make my feet like deer’s feet, and He will make me walk on my high hills”

(Habakkuk 3:17-19)

The teaching of the New Testament is no different. James as a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ commands us to *“count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience”* (James 1:2). Knowing the Lord governs and upholds everything we are under obligation to count it all joy when we fall into various trials and times of

adversity. Everyone can look back at a difficulty experienced and rejoice in the support that was received from family, friends and from members in the church. The Holy Spirit wants us to take it a step further. We are to consider and count it all joy – even when there is nothing positive about the entire experience; when you stand all alone, your body is filled with pain and there is no glimmer of earthly hope.

Why are we to count it all joy? We can rejoice because in faith we see beyond the trials. We can be patient in adversity because life will not always be the way it is today! James accentuates this with several pointed phrases in the fifth chapter of his letter. At the beginning of verse seven he says, *“Therefore, be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord.”* And again in verse eight he writes, *“You also be patient. Establish your hearts for the coming of the Lord is at hand.”* Through adversity and trial the Lord is fulfilling his purpose in our lives. How comforting it is to know that our Almighty, sovereign and omnipotent Lord is at the helm, directing every affliction to our eternal benefit.

Better things to come

Adversity and burdens of life pledge better things to come. The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed (Romans 8:18). This joy causes believers to consider it a privilege to have their faith tested – not because the trial is so pleasant but because they know that through the test the Lord is drawing them closer to Himself. They believe that the Lord indeed works all things for the good of those who fear Him.

Knowing that the Lord, in his providence, will turn to our benefit whatever adversity He sends us in this life of sorrow (Lord’s Day 9) makes it possible for children of the Lord to sing psalms while being burned at the stake, tortured or imprisoned. With tears of grief rolling down their cheeks, they can sing praise to the Lord standing at a grave side. With the ache of loneliness, the pain of physical ailments, the strain of stress and anxiety they can still sing and make melody to the Lord in their hearts. The LORD will never allow his children to carry more than they can bear. Those who suffer will never find a trial easy and it may only be later that they become aware of how the Lord was carrying them through their adversity.

The apostle Paul was burdened by a thorn in the flesh – something that he had to bear for the rest of his life. But it did not embitter him! Instead, he exclaimed, *“I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong”* (2 Corinthians 12:9, 10).

Pray that you may never become so overwhelmed or overpowered by afflictions that you lose sight of God’s providential care. In all the strife of mortal life steadfastly confess the doctrine of God’s providence. Learn to accept adversity in faith, to trust in the Lord and to believe that He, who created you and adopted you, knows what is best for you.

“Wait on the LORD; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart; wait, I say, on the LORD!”

(Psalm 27:14)

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