



I will be with thee

Some people have a tendency to depression and despair. All of us at times are shaken, anxious, panicky and struggling. We wonder how can we cope. We feel stretched to breaking point. We hear Satan whispering in our ear, 'You are in big trouble. You are finished. God doesn't care'. But instead of listening to Satan let us hear what God really says:

'When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee'.

(Isaiah 43:2)

God is with all those who trust in Him. Wait patiently and you will be wonderfully delivered.

The reality of trials

God says 'When thou passest', not 'if'. Every true Christian will have their sufferings in this life. Calvin, the great Reformer, had his share of sufferings. His three children all died in infancy. His wife, Idelette de Bures, died after only nine years of married life. He himself suffered from many painful illnesses. Wicked people sometimes get through this life very easily. The Psalmist is perplexed at this: *'For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no bands in their death: but their strength is firm. They are not in trouble as other men; neither are they plagued like other men'* (Psalm 73:3-5). It was only when he went into the house of God and thought on the future of the ungodly that his equilibrium was restored. Their punishment is kept for the next life. God's children however suffer in this life, yet it is never meaningless suffering: *'Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth'* (Hebrews 12:6). As a loving Father He corrects them. He will not spoil His children but trains them for a wonderful future in heaven. As gold is purified in the fire so the Lord places His people in the crucible to prepare them to be jewels in His crown, shining as the stars throughout eternity.

As we look at some Christians we wonder, how could I cope if that was me? Other times we wonder, why am I going through all this? Has the Lord specially selected me as a target for His arrows? Again our comfort is in the Scriptures:

'There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it'.

(1Corinthians 10:13)

The variety of trials

Illness can be hard to bear especially if it is one on top of another. Pain, weakness and disability stretch us to our limits. Worst of all is mental illness. It is not just a limb or an organ that is affected but the whole system is disabled.

Because the brain controls our thought patterns, plans and strategies, illnesses of the mind are doubly crippling. Further, because people cannot see the affected organ, they often have little sympathy or understanding. Foolishly they think that it is just a matter of pulling yourself together. Also it is sometimes thought that because the illness is in the mind it is a spiritual illness which can be sorted out by prayer, repentance and faith. This increases the pain and sense of guilt for the one whose brain is not functioning properly.

Bereavement brings many tears and a great sense of loneliness and loss. Family breakup is a great and common trial in these days. I have heard people say that if their spouse had died it would have been easier to bear. Careless and ungodly children are a trial to many a loving parent. How hard it is to cope with the thought of your beloved flesh and blood ending up in hell! Another increasingly common problem in today's financial climate is the loss of work. For someone who has been employed all their life this can cause great anxiety. Financial problems can make the future look very grim. There are many other trials: robbery, violence, fraud, an accident, unkindness of friends and persecution. You know your trials.

Sometimes several trials come together. If it was just one you could manage but when there are three you feel overwhelmed. Remember if you could cope easily it would not be a trial. We all get what will test us. Some could be crushed by a small test, but others need much more. Our loving, caring, heavenly Father fills our cup of sufferings for us and He measures every drop.

God's special relationship with us

A large part of the answer to trials is to look up: *'Be still, and know that I am God'* (Psalm 46:10). Instead of constantly focussing on the troubles, or looking inward at our own reserves and abilities to cope, look up to God. Think of His special relationship to us and His promises. Continuing to look at our sins and failures will lead to despair.

'But now thus saith the Lord that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not'.

(Isaiah 43:1)

The Lord created us from nothing but the focus here is especially on the new creation. Everything good that we are, is as a result of Him. The name Jacob reminds us of our nature as deceivers yet the Lord made us into Israel, the prince who prevails with God. We were slaves but He redeemed us and bought our freedom with His own blood. *'I gave Egypt for thy ransom, Ethiopia and Seba for thee'* (v3), no, more than that, I gave my Son for you. Therefore having paid this huge price for you, will I not value you highly? *'Since thou wast precious in my sight, thou hast been honourable, and I have loved thee'*. (Isaiah 43:4) I have adopted you, *'I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine'*. (Isaiah 43:1).

God's wonderful promise

'When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee'.

(Isaiah 43:2).

We have many examples of this from Scripture. God was with Israel passing through the Red Sea whereas the Egyptians were drowned. He was light to Israel and a troubling darkness to their enemies and caused their chariot wheels to come off. Jordan was overflowing her banks when God went with His people through the river into the promised land. At the command of Nebuchadnezzar Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace but before long Nebuchadnezzar was able to see someone else with them in the flames, the Lord Himself. The soldiers died but not a hair on the head of the faithful was singed.

You are going through terrible trials but He has given you the Comforter and *'He dwelleth with you and shall be in you. I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you'* (John 14:17-18). Why are we afraid when He is with us?

'Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? Hope in God: for I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God'.

(Psalm 43:5)

Calvin's comment

'While he (Isaiah) shows that the church will not be exempt from calamities and afflictions, but must maintain a constant warfare, he encourages to patience and courage; as if he said "The Lord hath not redeemed thee that thou mightest enjoy pleasures and luxuries, or that thou mightest abandon thyself to ease and indolence, but rather that thou shouldest be prepared for enduring every kind of evils". By fire and water he means every kind of miseries to which we are liable in this life; for we must contend not with calamities of one kind only, but with infinitely diversified calamities. At one time we must pass "through the water", and at another time "through the fire" ... For it often happens that he who has been victorious in one combat has been baffled by another kind of temptation. We are therefore tried by afflictions, but are at length delivered; we are baffled by the billows, but are not swallowed up; we are even scorched by the flames, but are not consumed. We have, indeed, the same feeling of pain as other men, but we are supported by the grace of God, and fortified by the spirit of patience, that we may not faint; and at length He will stretch out His hand and lift us up on high'.

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