

# What's so joyful about a trial?

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HAWKINS, Texas—How many of you are having some rather thorny trials or problems? Of those who are having problems, how many of you have learned to rejoice in them, counting them as blessings?

As the late Sen. Hubert Humphrey told Sen. Tom Eagleton back in 1972 when presidential candidate George McGovern denied him the vice-presidential slot on the ticket: "Tom, I'm sure someone has told you that this is actually a blessing in disguise. You're probably thinking—in the immortal words of Winston Churchill—it's a mighty well-disguised blessing."

We likewise have a terrible time thanking God for ugly experiences such as the loss of a job, experiencing the death of a spouse, son or daughter, suffering a nervous breakdown, or perhaps being told that your organs are being wasted by a malignant cancer.

Instead of conceiving of God as a being radiating love, people often envision our Maker as an indifferent caretaker of a bizarre cosmic lotto or craps game.

## **Unusual advice**

It seems incredible that the apostles Peter and James had the audacity to suggest we should exude happiness about pain and suffering.

■ **1 Peter 1:6-7:** "You should be exceedingly glad on this account, though now for a little while you may be distressed by trials and suffer temptations, so that the genuineness of your faith may be tested, your faith which is infinitely more perishable than gold which is tested and purified by fire."

We are to believe that the end result is to be preferred over cash in the bank?

James also claimed that trials (suffering and pain) are building blocks on the road to perfect character.

■ **James 1:2-4:** "Consider it wholly joyful, my brethren, whenever you are enveloped in or encounter trials of any sort, or fall into various temptations. Be assured and understand that the trial and proving of your faith bring out endurance and steadfastness and patience. But let endurance and steadfast-

ness and patience have full play and do a thorough work, so that you may be perfectly and fully developed (with no defects), lacking in nothing.”

God apparently uses suffering and pain to fashion that part of our character characterized as compassion, empathy and sympathy.

### Lesson from David

When we see the life of David, we notice he occasionally expressed anxiety and anger as he entered his trials. But then he learned to express gratitude to Almighty God for the *end results* of his ordeals.

- Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now your laws do I keep (Psalm 119:67).
- It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I might learn your statutes (verse 71).

David learned to love God and his fellowman by suffering affliction.

### Same lesson from Job

When we read about the life of Job, we realize he experienced a similar reaction to trials.

Emerging from the final stages of his trial, Job approached a state close to euphoria.

- **Job 42:3:** “[You said to me] who is this that darkens and obscures counsel without knowledge? Therefore [I now see] I have [rashly] uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.”
- **Verse 5:** “I had heard of you only by the hearing of the ear; but my now my [spiritual] eye sees you.”

Job, through his intense suffering, had spiritually grown up, had come to *understanding* and *insight* far beyond his years.

Paul suggested that trials bring maturity of character.

- **Romans 5:3-4:** “Moreover, let us also be full of our joy now! Let us exult and triumph in our troubles and rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that pressure and affliction and hardship produce patient and unswerving endurance. And endurance develops maturity of character—that is, approved faith and tried integrity. And character (of this sort) produces [the habit of] joyful and confident hope of eternal salvation.”

One of my former English professors, Dr. Calvin Israel, described maturity as the process of coming to grips with the reality of death and then adjusting to it.

### Frailty and vulnerability

The recognition of our frailty and vulnerability makes life precious.

In the Reformed Jewish prayer book, *The Gates of Prayer*, is a meditation that the congregation ponders silently before reciting the Mourner's Kaddish (a prayer in memory of the dead and evoking the coming of God's Kingdom):

"Actually we could not have our sensitivity without fragility. Mortality is the tax that we pay for the privilege of love, thought, creative work, the toll on this bridge of being from which clods of earth and snow, peaked mountain summits are exempt."

It is precisely their ability to be snuffed out that makes flowers, kittens, lambs and babies so precious. The English poet Shelley posed the question: "Love, why choose you the frailest for your cradle, your home and your bier?"

If our children were made of tungsten or industrial diamonds so they would not feel the blow of a Mack truck driving over them, we would not hold them in as high esteem. The objects that our love gravitates toward are soft, fragile, vulnerable, subject to decay and death. God seems to have designed nature with a fragile component.

■ **Romans 8:20-22:** "For the creation [nature] was subjected to frailty—to futility, condemned to frustration not because of some intentional fault on its part, but by the will of him who so subjected it, [yet] with the hope [Ecclesiastes 1:2] that nature itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and corruption [and gain an entrance] into the glorious freedom of God's children."

We know that the whole creation—of irrational creatures—has moaned together in the pains of labor until now (Jeremiah 12:4, 11).

### **Bitterness of defeat**

God desperately wants to give us life eternal but realizes we would hold it in low esteem unless we could compare it to death. If Satan and the rebellious angels never experience death, are never able to die, they will never fully taste the sweetness of life.

Former president Lyndon Baines Johnson in 1964 chose Hubert Humphrey as his running mate because Mr. Humphrey was acquainted with the bitterness of defeat as well as the sweetness of victory.

My dad lost a state House of Representatives election back in 1980 by a landslide. I think the bitterness of defeat and his obvious vulnerability drew us closer together.

The pain and suffering of the Depression drew us closer together as a nation.

I think this terrible trial with the scattering of the greater Church of God has also drawn us all closer.

### **Experience of Christ**

Paul insists that it was necessary for Christ to suffer as a human to understand the afflictions and the sensitivity of a human.

■ **Hebrews 2:17-18:** "So it is evident that it was essential that He be made like his brethren in every respect, in order that He might become a merciful [sympathetic] and faithful high priest in the things related to God to make atonement and propitiation for the people's sins. For because He Himself [in His humanity] has suffered in being tempted [tested], He is able [immediately] to run to the cry [to assist, relieve] of those who are being tempted and tested and tried [and who therefore are being exposed to suffering]."

Because Christ had to cope with temptation and had to fight His own human nature, He understands our struggle. Jesus realized at one point that His Father's will and His own were potentially at cross purposes.

■ **Matthew 26:39:** "Father, if it be possible take this cup from me, but not my own will but thy will be done."

One cannot realize the depths of Christ's agony when He fought temptation with every ounce of the strength in Him.

■ **Hebrews 4:15:** "For we do not have a High Priest who is unable to understand and sympathize and have a fellow feeling with our weaknesses and infirmities and liability to the assaults of temptation, but one who has been tempted in every respect as we are, yet without sinning."

Personally I would feel uncomfortable around a leader who never was tempted to steal or lie. I find it easier to receive counsel on cleanliness from an ex-slob than from a born neatness freak.

### Learning empathy

If we aspire to be followers of Christ, we need to have the ability to empathize with our brethren. We in the greater Church of God come from such diverse backgrounds, lacking a common family tradition such as one would experience in the Jewish community with a 5,000-year experience.

Even though we have such diverse backgrounds, God commands us to bear one another's burdens, to share in the hurt as well as the joy of our brethren.

■ **Galatians 6:2-3:** "Bear one another's burdens and troublesome moral faults, and this way fulfill and observe perfectly the Law of Christ, the Messiah, and complete what is lacking [in your obedience to it]. For if any person thinks himself to be somebody [too important to condescend to shoulder another's load] when he is nobody [of superiority except in his own estimation], he deceives and deludes and cheats himself."

Often people feel they are isolated in their problems.

■ **Proverbs 14:10:** "The heart knows its own bitterness, and no stranger shares its joy."

The ironic thing about this verse is that, when you have had a certain type of trial in common with a brother or sister, you are no longer a stranger to that kind of sorrow.

Some of us have lost a job over the holy days. Some have been on welfare and food stamps. Some have endured the humiliation of having the city turn off the water and the humiliation of surrendering credit cards. Some have been through an ugly divorce. Some of us have lost a parent and several close friends to death.

Before these things happened, we might have smugly felt that "it could never happen to me."

When these things happened, we asked, "God, how could this happen to me?"

### Compassion built through suffering

In retrospect, I thank God for having allowed me to go through various experiences. Nietzsche said, "That which will not kill me will make me stronger."

People who go through physical and emotional traumas find it easier to empathize with those who are suffering trials. The real unblessed people are those who have lived such charmed and insulated lives that they cannot relate to other people's problems.

I don't like trials and have never prayed for them to come. But if we are to share Christ's glorification we must also suffer with Him.

■ **Romans 8:17:** "And if we are [His] children, then we are [His] heirs also: Heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, sharing His inheritance with Him; only we must share His suffering if we are to share His glory."

A Lakota Indian proverb warns us, "Never judge another human being until you have walked a mile in his moccasins." When we know how it feels to walk in the other person's shoes, we find it easier to feel compassion.

Moses, who served as a type of Christ, placed himself in a position of suffering.

■ **Hebrews 11:25-26:** "Because he preferred rather to share the oppression [suffer the hardships] and bear the shame of the people of God than to have the fleeting enjoyment of a sinful life, he considered the contempt and abuse and shame [borne for] the Christ, the Messiah [who was to come], to be greater wealth than all the treasures of Egypt, for he looked forward and away to the reward [recompense]."

As a type of Christ, Moses warned his people to have empathy and compassion on the stranger:

■ **Leviticus 19:33-34:** "And if a stranger dwells temporarily with you in your land, you shall not suppress and mistreat him. But the stranger who dwells with you shall be to you as one born among you; and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

We can hardly call suffering fun, but God can't build compassion except through suffering. An old Jewish Proverb sums it all up: "The only whole heart is a broken one."