

Dear Fellow Redeemed,

So let's recap a bit.

- God gives man control over certain things. God does not micromanage people. We make our own choices in life and we are responsible for our choices. Yet God maintains control over everything. Nothing happens without God giving His Ok.
- People can do whatever they choose to do, even if it is completely evil and cruel to others. We have seen plenty of examples of that in history.
- God does not prevent them from working their evil, but God controls the outcome. It may backfire on themselves or they may cause harm, even death to others. But they cannot harm anyone God chooses to protect. We see examples of that throughout Scripture.
- God may use accidents or disasters as His judgment against unbelievers, but if God allows them to come into the life of a believer, He always uses it as part of His plan to bless them and give them peace, a future and hope, as we saw last week.
- We may not always receive the blessings God intends. In some cases we don't receive the blessing if we don't listen to the message God is giving through the trial. We need to understand what God is trying to work through suffering. So today we will look at:

Three Blessings God works through Trials.

We are going to consider three different texts that describe each of these blessings that God works in our lives through trials. We first turn to **Hebrews 12:5-11**

The Hebrew believers this letter was addressed to were suffering persecution for their faith. They were troubled by this and wondered why, and were considering turning back to Judaism. God first showed them how foolish that would be because Jesus is their only Savior. Then Chapter 11 reminded them how all the great people of faith in the Old Testament suffered many things. And now in chapter 12 God tells them to consider their suffering as discipline from God.

Listen Hebrews 12:5-11

“Have you also forgotten the encouragement that addresses you as sons? My son, do not regard the Lord's discipline lightly, and do not become weary of his correction. 6 For the Lord disciplines the one whom he loves, and he corrects every son he accepts. 7 Endure suffering as discipline. God is dealing with you as sons. Is there a son whose father does not discipline him? 8 If you are not disciplined (and all of us have received it), then you are illegitimate children and not sons. 9 In addition, we have earthly fathers who disciplined us, and we respected them. Should we not submit even more to the Father of the spirits and live? 10 They disciplined us for a little while, according to what seemed best to them, but God disciplines us for our good, so that we may have a share in his holiness. 11 No discipline seems pleasant when it is happening, but painful, yet later it yields a peaceful harvest of righteousness for those who have been trained by it.”

Trials and Suffering are a Form of Discipline from God.

Notice first of all, the persecution did not come from God. It was from unbelievers who were driven by Satan. Yet God told them to consider it discipline from Him. God could have prevented them from being persecuted, but He chose to allow it as a form of discipline. As He said, discipline is never pleasant at the time. When trials come, it causes real pain and suffering. If it wasn't painful or unpleasant, it wouldn't be very effective as discipline. But God always uses it for our good.

As unpleasant as it is, Discipline is an evidence of God's love. “For the Lord disciplines the one whom he loves, and he corrects every son he accepts.” When parents see some behavior or attitude in their child that will be detrimental in their life, they love them too much to just ignore it. If they don't do something about it, that trait will grow and become even more destructive. Discipline is a

way of showing your child that their action or attitude is not good so they can change their ways before it gets engrained in their lives. Such discipline is always done in love to help children develop into a caring, productive and God fearing adult.

So God loves us too much to ignore any behavior or attitude that would push us away from Him or undermine our witness as His children. Like a loving father, He carefully works to correct us when we stray. Such discipline is painful, but God does it because He loves us.

Now let's make sure we receive the Blessing that God intends through this discipline. What do you think of whenever some suffering or trouble comes into your life? Do you think, God has allowed this in my life so it must be for my good, and then turn to Him for help and deliverance? That's great if you do. You will receive some of the blessings God wants to give you through the trial. But you may miss this first and most important blessing.

If God uses troubles and suffering as discipline, that means there is something wrong in our lives that needs correcting. It may be some specific sin in your life that God is calling your attention to, but more often it is a general reminder of your sinfulness. All pain and suffering is the result of sin. Every suffering in life carries a message with it. That message is, "You are a sinner who deserves God's judgment. You need a Savior."

So our very first reaction to suffering should be to look at our lives and consider our sins. If some specific sins come to mind, turn to God in repentance for those sins. If you are not aware of any specific sins, then confess that you are a sinner and don't deserve God's goodness, but plead for His grace and forgiveness for Jesus' sake.

If we complain about our situation and say, "What did I do to deserve this?" Or if we do as Job did and begin to question God, then you will fail to receive this blessing that God is trying to work for you. Instead you are calling God a liar and pushing Him further away.

Suffering is a call to Repentance. The Apostle Peter says, "Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time," then he adds, "casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you." 1 Peter 5:6-7. Come to God in heartfelt repentance, then you will receive this first blessing from God, a heart that receives and rejoices in God complete love and forgiveness. As our text says, you will receive a "peaceful harvest of righteousness."

Confession of sins:

The second text we will consider is from 1 Peter 1:6-7

"6 In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, 7 that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

Trials and Suffering are given to Strengthen and Purify your Faith

Peter compares our suffering to the way gold is tempered and purified by fire. You apply intense heat to melt down the gold and burn off any impurities. You come out with shiny pure gold. In a similar way, God uses the various trials in life to purify and strengthen our faith. You already know this to be true, but let's think about how this works.

We always say that our faith is strengthened by God's word. And that is absolutely true. The Holy Spirit works through the Word to give faith and to strengthen it. So how does our suffering play into that? The Holy Spirit uses His word in connection with the suffering to make it all the more real and vital. There is a big difference between believing the truths of scripture and experiencing those truths. As we experience those truths for ourselves, they become solidified in our

mind and heart.

We can see that in the life of Abraham. God called Abram to leave his home and his father's house and go to a foreign land that God would show him. God promised that He would make Abram the father of a great nation and that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky and that the Savior would come from him. God gave Abram the faith to believe and he left his home to follow God's direction. However, Abram's faith was still weak. He did several foolish things and had many doubts.

How did God strengthen him to become the great man of faith that we know? Through trials followed by a reconfirming of God's word. For example: When Abraham trusted God and went to the land of Canaan, the first thing that happened was there was a drought and Abram couldn't even stay in that land. He had to go to Egypt. That challenged or tested his faith. Would he continue to trust in a God who promised great things and then let this drought happen? God reassured him with His word and Abram experienced how God brought him safely through that trouble.

God promised to make Abram a great nation, but he didn't even have a son yet. God didn't give Him a son for many years. As the years dragged on and still no son, Abram doubted and questioned God, he tried to figure out ways to make God's promise come true. Each time God renewed His promise to restore his faith. Finally, when it was absolutely impossible for Abram and Sarai to have a son, that is when God kept His promise and did the impossible, Isaac was born. It was through these trials and struggles that God taught Abraham to wait upon the Lord and trust in Him. That's how Abraham became the great man of faith we know.

This is one of the blessings God wants to work through the trials in your life. Let's make sure we receive that blessing. If ease or happiness is what we are expecting in life or think we deserve, then we will probably feel frustrated and betrayed when God chooses to strengthen your faith through trial and suffering. God causes us to grow the most when we are hurting the most. Suffering is a test to our faith. Will you eagerly follow a God who doesn't always make your life a bed of roses, but lets you suffer for a time in order to mature your faith and commitment to Him?

For many of us, God has blessed us all our lives with good times and many outward blessings with only a few little bumps along the way. Then if some real trial comes along it can be a real test to our faith. But God brings us through and strengthens our faith even more. Who are the people you admire the most for their strong faith? Isn't it usually the people who have suffered the most and still give all praise and glory to God? That is why James says, "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing." James 1:2-4

Confession of Faith: The Apostles Creed

There is one more blessing that God works through trials and suffering that we want to consider this morning.

III. Trials and Suffering Deepen Our Fellowship with Jesus

Listen to what the Apostle Paul says in **Philippians 3:7-11**

"7 But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. 8 Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; 10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, 11 if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead."

There is nothing more valuable in this life than the “knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord,” and to have a real fellowship relationship with Him. Paul says that he “suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him.” Therefore he encourages us by his own example to seek above everything else in life, that we may “know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.”

I would guess we are all on board with the first part of that. We too want to “Know Christ and the power of His resurrection.” But what about the next item, are you just as eager to know “the fellowship of His sufferings?” We’re probably not as anxious to share in His sufferings. Remember though, that the agony of the cross came before the glory of Christ’s resurrection. If we want to know and share in the power of His resurrection, we need to have a fellowship in His sufferings.

And we do have fellowship in His suffering, for when we were baptized, Paul says, we “were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.” Rom. 6:4 Yes, we share in His suffering and death by faith. His death counts as the payment for our own sins. We don’t have to suffer any more to help pay the penalty for our sins. It is Finished! In a few moments we will partake of Christ’s body and blood which He shed for us. That is the most wonderful fellowship in His suffering that gives us the full benefit of His suffering.

However, because of our fellowship with Christ, we do also suffer with Him. We are hated by the world because of Him. When Paul was beaten and driven out of one city after another and even stoned, we read, “And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, **“We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.”** Acts 14:21-22

Trials and suffering can help us move beyond a superficial knowledge and relationship with Jesus into a deeper, meaningful, daily walk with Him. Think about it, when everything is going well in your life you know God is there, but do you really feel the need for Him? Our faith life can easily become rather superficial and lack any real commitment. We may pray and worship but it becomes rather routine, lacking the fervency of real praise. If something else seems more important at the time, that takes precedence. We may read the Bible because that is what we were taught to do, but do you read with a desperation to hear from the Lord?

Doesn't that all change in times of suffering and hardship? Do you pray more fervently when times are tough? Does your Bible become a more cherished companion when you are searching for answers and reassurance? Suffering in our life makes us feel the need for God’s presence and blessing. So God may use it as a way to draw us closer to Him in a deeper, more meaningful fellowship with Him. When we feel our weakness, we are more eager to receive His strength and know the real peace it brings.

Take a look at our bulletin cover and recall the event. The disciples were in a boat trying to cross the Sea of Galilee when a storm came up. They had been battling the storm almost all night long. They had to be exhausted and afraid they may not make it. Then Jesus came out walking on the water and they thought He was a ghost. It says they were terrified. Then Jesus called out to them, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.” When Jesus got into the boat the wind stopped instantly. What sweet peace!

The next time you are battling one of the storms of life, listen for the voice of Jesus, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.”

Amen.