

“WISDOM FOR COUNTING TRIALS AS BLESSINGS.”

Rev. Robert T. Woodyard

First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Text: James 1:2-8, 12

Introduction.

One thing a pastor has to do is look ahead and anticipate what is coming and then equip the congregation to face that future. It doesn't take a prophet to look ahead and say that in this life we will have afflictions and trials, we will endure suffering in all sorts of various trials.

I feel more compelled to prepare us because of the complacency many of us have as comfortable American Christians. We are easily lulled into thinking we deserve an easy life.

I revealed this attitude when I asked you for prayers for flying to Ohio and for driving back to Lynden. Asking for prayer is good, but my motive wasn't completely pure. I wanted everything to go as well as possible, I didn't want any inconvenience, any problems, any hardships.

God put me to the test right away when my midnight flight out of Seattle was delayed an hour and a half and I was told I wouldn't make my connection out of O'Hare. It was clear to me that I had no control over what was happening. God was most merciful and I actually made the connection with the door closing behind me. Not exactly the crown of life, but a clear sign of God's undeserved generous grace.

Wisdom about suffering.

Remember three weeks ago I said in the midst of suffering to ask God for wisdom about that suffering? Don't get your wisdom about suffering from the world; don't look for light in the darkness. The world will only say it's bad and should be avoided at all costs. Or it's because of something bad you did and you deserve it.

Don't get your wisdom about suffering from the prosperity preachers and health and wealth gospel because they will say your suffering is because of your lack of faith.

Get your wisdom about trials and suffering from God. And if you ask God what will He tell you? We can get a clue from what He has already said in His Word. So let's spend some time looking at Scripture and gathering Scriptural wisdom for dealing with painful trials and difficult circumstances and even persecution.

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial.

I doubt trials would be in any of our definitions of what it means to be blessed. Blessed is the one who has lots of money, who has success in business, who has a great job, who is happily married, who has a nice house, who gets promotions, who has bumper crops or great milk production, who has a big retirement.

The world has a pretty clear definition of what it means to be blessed and this isn't it. But then the world's definition is short-sighted. Like my definition of blessed being making my plane connections and getting back safely.

What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul?

Once again the Bible contradicts the world and leaves us with a paradox. The blessed are often those who don't look blessed by this world's standards.

Where does suffering come from?

Does God just allow it? That says God is passive when it comes to suffering. He can stop it if He chooses to but often He doesn't.

But God is never passive about anything. God ordains it, determines it and decrees it. He is intimately involved in every aspect of it. Friends, consider this carefully. I never want an affliction God didn't send, that God did not intend for my good and His glory.

Exodus 4:11 Then the Lord said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?"

Isaiah 45:7 God declares, "I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things.

Amos 3:6 When a trumpet sounds in a city, do not the people tremble?
When disaster comes to a city, has not the LORD caused it?

Psalms 115:3 Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.

Heidelberg Q.27. WHAT DO YOU UNDERSTAND BY THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD?

A. Providence is the almighty and ever present power of God by which he upholds, as with his hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty - all things, in fact, come to us *not by chance* but from his fatherly hand.

Trials and afflictions are sent to us by his Fatherly hand. Another way of saying this is that they are sent by a friend, by someone who loves us with an exceedingly great love. This is the reason we can count them as joy and see them as a blessing, a grace disguised, a severe mercy, a glorious intrusion.

What are the purposes of God in our suffering?

God wants us to see that He has a perfect purpose in what is happening to us, and because His plans are always perfect, we can accept them in trust as redemptive and meaningful. We have only to remember Jesus' suffering to remember this.

The reasons I am about to give are all from Scripture. We can't say God has not revealed some of His purposes in suffering.

1. God brings suffering and trials into our lives to remind us that we live in a fallen world, a world broken and polluted by sin and rebellion and disobedience, and the effects are all around us. All suffering and trials remind us of the great sinfulness of Adam's sin against a holy God and the severity of the impact of Adam's sin on all of us and on the whole creation. The horror of suffering should drive home the horror of sin. May we feel the horror of sin the way we feel the horror of human pain or tragedy.
2. God brings suffering and trials into our lives to reveal our weaknesses and to keep us humble and dependent on Him, to keep us turning to Him in prayer for our weaknesses.

II Corinthians 1:8-9 For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. 9 ... But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.

II Corinthians 12:7, 9 So to keep me from becoming conceited ... a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. ... 9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

3. God brings suffering and trials to conform us more and more to the image and likeness of Christ, to be suffering servants as He was. This teaches us that the greatest good in the Christian life is not absence of difficulties, but the presence of Christlikeness (Rom. 8:28-29; 2 Cor. 1:5, 4:8-11; 1 Pet 4:12-13).

I Peter 4:13 Rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

4. God brings suffering and trials to wean us from our love of this world, to make us long for heaven more; to make the joy of heaven even more sweet. In being deprived of this world's pleasures and joys, we come to love God for God's own sake (Rom. 8:18; 1 Pet. 4:13; Ps. 126:5; Isa. 61:3).

Psalm 63:3 Your love is better than life.

Psalm 126:5 Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy!

II Corinthians 4:17-18 For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, 18 as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen.

Romans 8:18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

5. God brings suffering and trials to teaches us that God is more concerned about our character than our comfort (Rom. 5:3-4; Heb. 12:10-11).

Romans 5:3-5 We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.

6. God brings suffering and trials sometimes to win the lost (Ps. 119:67, 71; 2 Tim 2:8-10; 4:5-6).

II Timothy 2:9-10 I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound! 10 Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.

7. God brings suffering and trials to deepen our faith and trust, and increase our holiness. God is constantly testing, pruning, sharpening, strengthening, purifying, changing, refining, reforming. Testing our faith and testing our love.

Hebrews 12:10-11 He disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. 11 For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

James 1:12 Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for *when he has stood the test* he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

8. God uses suffering and trials to make us more compassionate and to enable us to comfort others who are weak or hurting (2 Cor. 1:3-11). Suffering also deepens our bonds with each other and our sense that we are all equal and in this together.

II Corinthians 1:3-4 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

9. God uses suffering and trials to reveal His glory and grace to us and for others to see that He is the treasure in us, He is the reason for our joy and peace, not ourselves or our own lives. The

glory of God is most seen in His suffering, crucified, and risen Son. This is infinitely true and beautify and good.

Application and conclusion.

Just as we grieve but not as those without hope, so we suffer but not as those without hope. We endure trials knowing that God is in them and He is with us in them. It is in our trials that we find God and draw nearer to Him and Him to us.

This is the difference between Conor Thorpe, the Evergreen Christian School teacher who died this past week and Brittany Maynard. Both were diagnosed with brain tumors shortly after they married.

Brittany Maynard is a 29 year old woman who has made national news about her decision to move to Oregon so that next Sunday she can take some pills to end her life. I don't make light of the terrible suffering that Brittany would face. She doesn't know God and the redemptive power He has over suffering. She doesn't know about the strength God gives to do what is humanly impossible.

What she is doing is not death with dignity, it's not brave, it is fear, it is running, it is denying God and His presence and His power and His will over her will.

Conor Thorpe as a Christian faced his trial with courage and God's grace. He trusted in the perfect providence of God and did not see his suffering as outside of God's loving, sovereign purposes.

God is real and personal our lives matter and our suffering matters. Our lives are not our own, our days and the number of them are not ours to decide.

God is always at work in us making something of us that we have not yet attained. He is the potter and we are the clay. Even when it makes no sense to us, God knows exactly what He is doing, and what His goal and purpose are. He is perfect and wise and in heaven we will see it clearly. Until then we must trust Him.

Suffering is not the absence of God or the absence of goodness or the absence of beauty; it is in fact that place where we see truth, beauty, goodness and God most clearly.

No wonder James says "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials" and "blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him."

Prayer:

Holy Father, thank you that because of the glory of your all-sufficient grace in our lives we can say thank you in the midst of everything that goes wrong in our world and in our own lives and bodies. You have given every pain a purpose to the glory of your grace, you have sanctified every suffering that we be more like Christ and our faith more like pure gold. You have carried us in your arms through the fiercest storms. You have never failed us, you are not failing us now and you never will. May everything in our lives continue to be a demonstration of your glory and your grace and may everything in our lives point to Jesus and be a light of hope and comfort to those in affliction.