



**MOUNT MERRION FREE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
**[BELFAST NORTHERN IRELAND].**



**Pulpit Ministry of Mount Merrion Free Presbyterian Church**

Lord's Day Morning 9<sup>th</sup> March 2008.

*Series 'God's Covenant Heritage.'*

*No.11 "Understanding The Trials of God's Heritage."*

Scripture Reading 1 Peter Ch 4:12

By. Rev. Paul Thompson.

I would envisage that one of the first observations that can be made regarding the Christian, is that as God's people we are not exempt from afflicting and trying circumstances. There is a pseudo belief that has circulated for centuries, that Christians are free from trouble and trial, yet how wrong that assumption is. The words of Christ in John Ch16:33 are to be understood as relating to the earthly experience of God's people, "*In this world ye shall have tribulation.*" These words express that, trial, affliction and tribulation are to be expected and anticipated by the Christian as part of our earthly journey. The Christian is no stranger to affliction, indeed he very often finds that he is a burdened man, [*The word 'tribulation' relates to being 'burdened' or 'troubled'*]. The tribulation of which Christ speaks, in John Ch16:33 can relate to either physical persecution, or to those providential occurrences that come our way and cause our souls to be burdened with care! The Apostle Peter knows that! The Christians to whom Peter was writing were no strangers to affliction and were not going to be strangers to suffering and heartache, he warns them to prepare for it, [Ch4:12], "*Think it not a strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you.*" Applying Peter's words and Christ's words [John Ch16:33] to the time in which Peter wrote his epistle, you will find that First Peter was written during a period of heightened persecution, the monstrous tyrant Nero in AD64 had destroyed Rome and passed the blame on to the Christians, thus putting the Church of Christ into the spotlight. Six years later persecution would be carried forth in an even more despotically manner, Titus would enter Jerusalem and ravage the city [AD70], many lives would be lost, homes destroyed, parents would have their children slaughtered, children orphaned. The ensuing attempt to suppress any remaining traces of Christianity! The times in which these Christians lived were not easy. Ch5:9 declares that tribulation is a universal prospect for the Church of Christ, "*Knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world.*" God's Heritage throughout the known world both then and now are a suffering people.

Outward persecution is one facet of suffering that the Church will always have to endure, personal trials are another. I think that it can be safely said that the personal element of trial is one that burdens the hearts of the Lord more than any other kind of trial, I refer to those times of testing that cause the soul increased sorrow, it may be bereavement, it may be an incurable illness, unemployment and the pressures that that brings or it may be something else other than outward physical persecution, yet the truth remains Christians are not strangers to tribulation!

Peter is conscious that whatever the trial that comes the Christian's way, it is the cause of much anxiety for the Lord's people. Anxiety, worry and stress, pressure from within and without all combine as a united front to drive the Christian to despair! 1Peter Ch1:6, "*Though now for a season...ye are in heaviness [grief/sorrow] through manifold temptations [adversities].*" When the '*season of heaviness*' comes, Peter interjects these words of grace, "*Casting all your care upon Him, for He careth for you.*" Before we consider these words as they fall to us systematically in our passage, we must first understand what trial is and what the design of it is.

### **1) The Definition of Trial.**

Many Christians when they undergo some trial either conclude or are told wrongly that the reason for their affliction is due to some sin in their lives. They are instructed to search their lives for some sin that has caused this calamitous disease or tragedy etc. That statement is partly true, but not altogether true. God does inflict his people with trial in order to correct them, but not all affliction is due to our need for correction. What remains for us is to discern whether our affliction is a chastisement or a test of our faith. Are we undergoing trial or correction?

#### **i) Chastisement.**

Heb Ch12:5-11 teaches us that God does chastise His Covenant children, in the same way that a father must lay on the rod of correction. God's correction is always in accordance with His character, He is caring in how He administers discipline, He does not rush in and thrash His children, He first warns the Child with mild correction, but if there is a despising of the correction then a firmer approach must be adopted. Hence Paul says, "*My son despise not the chastening of the Lord.*" for if you do, then expect greater chastisement! The Father knows what must necessarily follow for the child's sake. The application is, that there can never be severe chastening except first there be a wilful disregard for the Father's initial chastening. The apostle Paul suffered many things by way of bodily infirmities and physical beatings etc, however, it is evident that Paul did not view

*"The Punishment of Sin is everlasting, but the fatherly chastisement of a child of God is but for a season."  
...Charles Haddon Spurgeon...*

these as signs of God's disapproval with him [2Cor Ch11:30], "*I will glory of the things which concern mine infirmities.*" we must ask when in trial, have I disregarded the milder chastening of my Father? The Lord may do this by '*drawing a cloud across the heavens*' [Dr. Peter Masters], that is by withdrawing the blessedness of fellowship with Him, in order to make us feel our loss and know our sinfulness. Another way in which God disciplines us, is by upsetting and frustrating our earthly plans, he removes the gods in our lives, the idolised car etc, that takes up our time us much. Often I have considered the time that I polish the car or time taken in some other unnecessary task, it rebukes me when I reflect on my devotional time with the Father! '*Chastisement is the badge of our sonship*' [Dr. J.R Beeke]. What son does not know his father's chastening hand, no chastisement it is a sign of illegitimacy. Chastisement never goes beyond the point of repentance. Affliction in this sense is administered by God as a medicine with the purpose of restoring! It is true that the Corinthians who abused their bodies and the sacraments of the Lord's supper, some of them were afflicted with sickness and some died! [1Cor Ch11:30]. God was reproofing them! If God is chastening us, we will know it, furthermore we should rejoice it, thank God that we are His Children.

## ii) Testing.

Dear Christian when dealing with such a subject as '*why Christians suffer*' we need to exercise careful application, as some Christian's undergo severe trials, the death of a child or a parent, the body inflicted by cancer etc. I personally believe that such afflictions are not the result of God's affliction, if they are, then that individual must be in an indescribable state of backsliding and disregard of repeated increased warnings, "*for whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth.*" However, where there is a severe affliction, that person knowing his or her own heart should not look upon that affliction as being a chastisement from the Lord, but as a test. What earthly father would desire to take the life of his child or inflict some brutal form of discipline? Not so our Father in heaven. In this context we can be confident that accidents whether fatal or disabling, health breakdowns, are disciplines for God. Yet it remains that many of the Lord's people must endure affliction. How then do we view our trials, if God doth not intend to correct me what then does He intend?

## 2) The Design of Our Trial. "*To try us.*" [Ch4:12; Ch1:7].

Depending whether or not we are under reproof or test determines what the design is. If it is chastisement we are receiving then the design will be corrective, but if our trial be a test, then what is God testing us for? In this section we will look at trial from the testing aspect. Failure here to understand our afflictions is one of the chief reasons as to why many Christians fall into great despair. One of the preliminary thoughts that ought to govern our state of mind when passing through our trial is that all my affliction has been permitted by God and is intended for my good [Rom Ch8:28], "*All things work together for good, to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose.*" Paul like Peter is showing Christians that though we are to expect trying times we are never to suspect God as having forsaken us! He is the one who permits us to be tried! Job Ch23:10, "*When He hath tried me.*" It is God who tries the Saints [Psalm 66:10-11]. The reasons for God testing us are several, some of which are:

### i) A Test of Our Faith.

As was noted in our introductory remarks, God has told us to expect circumstances that will try us. The word '*try*' clearly relates to a test. This interpretation of our trials is especially brought forth in Ch1:7 where the Apostle speaks of "*The trial of your faith.*" It is clear that Job was being tried by God. Satan was permitted by God to buffet Job in order that God might prove Job to be a faithful servant. Thomas Manton described the Christian's trials as being "*God's arrows shot from Satan's bow.*" The question arises, '*why does God try His people?*' It is not for His own sake that he tries us, He knows us [He is omniscient], He knows our frame, he knows that we are but dust, weak and unable to cope with the trials of life. God tries us in order to have us know ourselves! Turn to 2 Chronicles Ch32:31 "*God left him, to test him, that he might know all that was in his heart.*" God didn't need to know by testing what was in Hezekiah's heart. He already knew his heart, but He wanted him to see his own heart!

Very often we are so taken up with our own success that our dependence and faith in God is weakened, the Lord has to call us to attention. Is it not true that as Christians we very often attribute our success to our own labour, unconsciously we feel as if we are managing through without the Lord, but as soon as our pattern of life

*"From the cradle to the coffin, affliction and sorrow are the appointed lot of man. He comes into the world with a wailing cry, and he often leaves it with an agonizing groan. Well is this earth called "a valley of tears," for it is wet with them in infancy, youth, manhood, and old age."* J.C Philpot {1857}

is disrupted, our faith is put to the test. We suddenly realise that we are not what we thought we were, those things that we deemed important suddenly are no longer significant! (1) It may be sickness that reminds us that we have not the power to sustain our health. (2) It may be unemployment that reminds us that God provides for us. (2) It may be death that God uses to teach us that life is His to give and take! Our faith is tested! The ungodly will look on and they will say, ‘*how harsh your God is!*’ Why does He treat you like that! God does not intend to destroy us, but He intends by our trials to perfect us, make us better Christians!

The tried Christian is described as being in the furnace, the imagery is taken of the blacksmith as he takes his piece of metal and places it in the fire, he does so to temper and shape that piece of metal for its intended purpose, but he never takes his eyes off that piece of metal, he won’t keep it in the furnace any longer than it is needed. God knows what we can endure, His eyes are upon us His purpose for us is ever before Him, as He prepares us for greater service!

ii) A Test of Patience. [Rom Ch5:3-4; James Ch1:3-4].

Heb Ch10:35-36 these Hebrews were undergoing afflictions, Paul tells them not to lose confidence in God, “*Cast not away...your confidence.*” Do not be disheartened under your trials. The human disposition is such that we are prone to ‘*go under*’ and sink beneath our afflictions, to complain and murmur. We need patience to endure our afflictions, God allows us to be afflicted in order that we might be exercised in patience! James Ch1:3-4, “*The trying of your faith worketh patience.*” We often describe a patient man or woman who under the heaviness of affliction as ‘*having the patience of Job.*’ Job’s trial taught him patience! Christians who are longest and most severely afflicted are the most patient. Albert Barnes said that Christians are to, “*lie calmly in the hands of God, and submit to his will day by day, and year by year.*” It may be a wayward child, dear mother or Father, bear patiently with that child!

iii) A Means of Sanctification.

God gives affliction to purge our *corruption*. The eye, though a tender part, yet when infected, we put sharp medicines into it, to purge out the disease. The people of God are dear to Him as the apple of His eye, when corruption is found in them, He applies the medicine. He weans us away from the world and from that which captures our heart!

Some Closing Application.

How cruel the message of the Prosperity, health and wealth Gospel, i.e. that Jesus wants you to be happy all the time, that the gospel will bring you prosperity, wealth and success, all your troubles will be over etc. That is not what the Gospel promises! Those in Covenant with Christ are to expect tribulation, but in their tribulation they will be purged from selfish lusts, they will be taught patience and in the end they shall come forth as gold!

- God knoweth all about my tribulation. Job could say in Ch23:10, “*He knoweth the way that I take...*” The question often arises, ‘*why does God try His people, allow them to go through severe trials?*’ Though I may not discern why He calls me to pass this way, yet He knoweth! That gives me a holy confidence in God!

- I am never separate from Christ through all my affliction, yea He is with me, suffering with me, by virtue of our union, “*In all their affliction He was afflicted.*” [Isaiah Ch63:9] Christ feels the pain of His members.

By. Paul Thompson.

*“This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them.”*

Hebrews 10:16