

James 1:2-4; Romans 5:3-5; 8:28 “Joy and Gratitude in Trials”

Intro. There are preachers who say that God wants you to be happy. So He wants to turn poverty into prosperity, and sickness into good health. If your circumstances are difficult, just pray and believe that God will quickly change your circumstances to bring happiness.

Yet my Bible teaches that there will be times when it is God’s will for you to endure suffering and difficulties. There may even be times when such difficulties are never removed in this life. We see the reason why in the Scripture texts that I have just read to you. James says in v.3 that the testing of your faith produces patient endurance.<sup>1</sup> Paul says the same thing in Romans 5:3. Think of how important it is to develop patient endurance! As you face trials, you may have a tendency to give up. However, God wants you to develop that inner strength that will enable you to bear up during difficult trials for more than just a few hours or days. After all, why would you need patient endurance for a trial that only lasts a little while? That inner quality is developed over time as you endure trials.

Then in both Scriptures we see that God uses such trials to build character into our lives and to mature us, so that we lack nothing. Paul adds that the trials of life give opportunity to exercise our Christian hope for a better day to come. We are assured that such a hope will not end in disappointment because the love of God has filled our hearts through the indwelling Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:4b-5). Our Christian hope can sustain us through very difficult trials because we know that deliverance will ultimately come.

Romans 8:28 gives another perspective that will help us as we face the trials of life. We are assured that God will work all things together for good to those that love God and to those who are called according to His purpose. The difficulty does not seem good at the time, but we are assured that our sovereign and omnipotent God is able to bring about some good through that experience. For these reasons, we can actually have joy in the midst of trials, and be grateful to God that He is going to work these trials for our good.

Cheryl experienced one of the greatest trials of her life, and I shared in her suffering and grief. She endured pain and sickness from her gallbladder for four days while they put her through many tests to diagnose the problem. Finally, they decided to remove the gallbladder laparoscopically. She immediately began to feel better and to eat without nausea. Her pain subsided significantly. Yet within a week she began to experience renewed pain and nausea and other symptoms. Her liver enzymes started going up significantly. She began to experience fatigue, finding it difficult to climb the stairs in our home. She was advised to be admitted to the hospital for an MRI and over the next 30 days she endured five biopsies, several CT scans, a couple of MRIs, and multiple blood tests. She was stuck with needles over and over again. Her body gained at least 27 pounds of fluid retention. She got to where she could not move about without assistance from one or two people. Inflammation began to rage within her body as her immune system became highly activated against something. That resulted in “acute” kidney failure and over three weeks of dialysis. That was probably the most difficult part. With no diagnosis or explanation for her symptoms, we were looking at the likelihood that she would be

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<sup>1</sup> That a better translation of *hupomone*.

on dialysis for the rest of her life and she could remain significantly disabled. We thought she might not even survive this ordeal.

As most of you know, God answered many prayers that resulted in a significant improvement of her health and well-being. Surgery was performed to remove what her immune system was overreacting to. Yet especially prior to that surgery, our Christian faith was truly tested. Why was God allowing this to happen to a *pastor's* wife, who is such a godly Christian woman? What would we do if God did not answer our prayers for healing? How would we respond to a significant, ongoing health problem? Would we become down and depressed? Would we question God and even lose our faith?

Well, James 1:2 says, "count it all joy when you fall into various trials...." Romans 5:3 says, "we also glory in tribulations...." Those reactions are quite opposite from most people in such circumstances! How is that even possible? In both verses the key is the word, "knowing." Biblical knowledge is really important! The proper understanding of the purpose and ultimate outcome of our suffering will bring comfort and even joy and gratitude in the midst of our suffering. Also, knowing the truth of Romans 8:28, that God will work all things together for our good, will enable us to rejoice by faith in God's Word. So what good did we experience during our recent trial? Let me share the following examples:

## I. WE EXPERIENCED GOD'S PRESENCE IN A NEW WAY

Psa. 23:4 says, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil [or adversity]; For You [are] with me...." God says in Heb. 13:5, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." In Exodus 3:7-8 God said to Moses, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry .... I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them...." I can testify to the fact that God was always with us even though at times it seemed as though He was not. As we walked by faith rather than by sight and feeling, we claimed the promises of God's Word that He was always with us, every day, through every painful test and difficulty.

In 2 Tim. 4:16-17 Paul wrote, "At my first defense no one stood with me, but all forsook me.... But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me...." The Lord had caused His presence to be felt in a remarkable manner. It is great to know that no matter what people do, Jesus is always there for you.

I want to apply this truth to our own responsibility to engage in the ministry of presence when a loved one is going through a difficulty. At such times we may be concerned about what we should or should not say. Don't worry about that. Always remember that just your presence means a lot.

## II. AN OPPORTUNITY TO SEE GOD WORK IN SOME AMAZING WAYS

We experienced many answers to prayer which we would not have otherwise been able to experience, were it not for the trial we faced. I shared many answers to specific prayers when I shared the testimony a few weeks ago.

One of the most significant providential works of God was how He brought about the surgery which no other doctors were inclined to do or recommend. I called Cheryl's Nurse Practitioner [Kristin Andrs] and expressed my frustration with the lack of progress in diagnosing the problem and getting her on the road to recovery, even after 30 days. She was frustrated as

well, so she made a series of phone calls to four different surgeons, trying to find one who would do the surgery. Though she made the phone calls during the time when most surgeons were tied up with surgery, every one of those surgeons returned her call in a timely manner and offered some kind of help. The last surgeon she talked to got one of the younger surgeons on his team to agree to do the surgery. He even agreed to do it the very next day, and to our amazement, that prayer was answered. After the surgery, I was able to witness visible improvement *every* single day. I would not have witnessed these and other amazing answers to prayer had not Cheryl experienced the need for such prayer.

Dear Christian, you cannot experience victory without entering into the battle. You cannot pass a test without taking a test. You generally will not experience great answers to prayer without going through a time of great need. Every trial and difficulty is an opportunity to see God work in some amazing ways.

### III. I WAS GIVEN AN OPPORTUNITY TO MANIFEST COVENANT LOVE

When Cheryl and I married 45 years ago, this is what I vowed to her that day [Play picture/audio clip]. As Cheryl was going through this serious and extensive illness, there was *never* any question in my mind whether I would be faithful to be with her and help her through this great trial. Let me tell you two of the reasons why. First, I believe that living the Christian life is largely a matter of learning the attributes and actions of God, and then follow His example. Eph. 5:1-2 says, “Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us....” God is a faithful, loving, covenant-keeping God. Deut. 7:9 says, “Therefore know that the LORD your God, He [is] God, the faithful God who keeps covenant....” In Rom. 8:39 Paul says that nothing is “able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Therefore, He expects *us* to be faithful and express covenant love, especially to our spouses. Secondly, I was determined to be faithful to express covenant love because I am absolutely confident that if I had been the one who was very sick in the hospital, Cheryl would have been faithful to me. She would have been right by my side, ministering to me and being an advocate for me.

One expression of my love for Cheryl was my daily service to her. You can’t pay staff to care for loved ones as well or as promptly as love will do. If we had relied only on staff to get her out of bed and help her walk 2-3 times/day, I think she would still be wheelchair bound to this day!

Can *your* spouse count on you to express faithful, covenant love “for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health”? If you are a Christian, you have entered into a covenant relationship with Jesus Christ. You are the Bride of Christ. He shed His blood to ratify the New Covenant (Mt. 26:28). Will you love Him and be faithful to Him no matter what happens in life?

### IV. THIS TRIAL DREW US CLOSER TOGETHER AND TO GOD

I am told that those who are comrades in battle form a close bond of friendship that lasts for a lifetime. Cheryl and I battled her sickness together, and we drew closer as a result. My love and service to her bonded us as well.

Of course, trials also have a way of drawing us closer to God as well. Haven’t you found that to be true? We drew closer to God through prayer that was more intense and frequent than

normal. We drew closer to God through our devotional Bible readings. I looked forward to the times when I would read God's Word to Cheryl each morning and pray together.

So Christian, another reason you can rejoice in your trials is because such trials can draw you closer to God. Difficulties drive us to our knees in prayer. Don't waste your sorrows. Let God use them in your life.

## V. AN OPPORTUNITY FOR OUR FAITH TO BE TESTED AND PROVEN GENUINE

1 Peter 1:7 says, "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." The word translated "genuineness" (*dokimion*) is from a Gk. word that was used of the *testing* of gold. The goal of the test is to find that the metal is truly gold. And Peter says that true faith is "much more precious than gold." Even so, it is desirable to know whether that which appears to be Christian faith is genuine. Only when our faith is tested by a trial can we know that our faith is genuine. A true Christian remains faithful to God under a trial. On the other hand, as the parable of the sower demonstrates, a person who is not a true believer will fall away when troubles and difficulties come (Mt. 13:21).

The great preacher Charles Spurgeon said, "A false faith can only float in smooth water; but true faith, like a lifeboat, is at home in storms. If our religion does not bare us up in time of trial, what is the use of it? If we cannot believe God when our circumstances appear to be against us, we do not believe Him at all."

I never lost faith that God could answer prayer and restore Cheryl to full health. Even if He did not heal Cheryl, my faith would never waver, for God would sustain us through that ongoing trial, and He would ultimately heal her, if need be, through the doorway of death into eternal life.

Is *your* faith being tested now by some trial of adversity? If you remain faithful to God, you will find great comfort that God is using the trial to demonstrate the genuineness of your faith. Otherwise, let any failure of the test cause you to turn to God and seek true saving faith, which only He can give (John 6:65; 1 Cor. 3:5).

Finally, this trial of sickness gave us:

## VI. AN OPPORTUNITY TO RECEIVE LOVE FROM SO MANY PEOPLE!

Receiving love is one of the great joys in life. To be loved is a great feeling. One occasion when we have a much-needed opportunity to give love is when someone is going through a difficulty. Galatians 6:2 says, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." What is the law of Christ? It is to love one another. Because of this great trial, a significant number of believers fulfilled that Scripture by offering assistance to help bear our burden. Over a dozen people offered to come to the hospital and stay with Cheryl while I got away to take care of personal needs and responsibilities. Some of the same believers provided meals or other gifts. We received so many visits, cards, calls, texts, emails and social media expressions of love. Many prayed with us in person or over the phone, including a member of the chorus that we belong to. Some sent written prayers and Scripture verses for us to read. Some of the people who lovingly reached out to us we haven't had much contact with in a long while. It was so good to see or hear from them once again.

When you go through such difficulties, it is such a blessing to be a part of a church family. You are much more likely to receive love and support, not only from family, but also your church family. Due to my Interim Pastorate, we actually were blessed with the connection we had with *two* church families, a double blessing!

The apostle Paul faced imprisonment due to persecution. Many people ministered to him during such difficulties. Paul wrote in 2 Tim. 1:16, “The Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me....” While with Cheryl in the hospital, I read in Acts 27:2, “And embarking in a ship ... we [Paul & Luke] put to sea, accompanied by Aristárchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica.” Many of us know about Luke, a faithful ministry companion of Paul. Yet here we read about Aristarchus, who had previously traveled and worked with Paul on several occasions (19:29; 20:4; Col 4:10). What friends those two were to travel with Paul *the prisoner* by ship over many days! It reminded me of Prov. 18:24, “...there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.” What a blessing it was for Cheryl and I to have some friends like that!

We had a number of Christian friends who said to me, “If there is anything I can do to help, let me know.” I appreciated that. I know that many would have responded to a request. However, what I appreciated *most* were the ones who went ahead and offered to help in specific ways. Let me mention a few suggestions, especially for someone who is spending more than a few days in the hospital: 1) Can I come and stay with your loved one for a few hours to give you a break? 2) When I come to visit, can I bring you a meal? Or just hand them a meal gift card upon arrival. 3) Do you need for me to cut your grass or take care of other things around your house? 4) I want to pray for you. What specific needs can I pray for? We received such loving ministry by no small number of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

I want to make a different kind of In order for Christians to show love by bearing one another’s burdens, that means that we must be willing to inform others of the difficulties we are going through. Ask people to pray for you and share specific needs. Ask for your name to be put on the prayer list. Cheryl’s name ended up on prayer lists all over the country!

Conclusion: So the next time you face a difficult trial, I want you to remember what I have shared, and look with joyful anticipation for what God is going to do to build character and maturity, to draw you closer to Him, to experience answers to prayer, to have your faith tested and proven genuine, and to experience love from others. Don’t get down and depressed, but by faith in God’s Word rejoice and give thanks to God for what He is going to do in your life!

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).