

Cured By Another Poison

1 Corinthians. 9:24-27; 2 Corinthians. 12:7

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Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but *only* one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. 25 And everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then *do it* to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. 26 Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; 27 but I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified (1 Corinthian 9:24-27).

And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me to keep me from exalting myself (2 Corinthians 12:7)!

A Devil

I do believe there is a devil. I probably do not assign to Satan the power that others may credit to him. Satan is a fallen angel, not a fallen deity. I do not believe Satan is ubiquitous (omnipresent) nor omnipotent nor omniscient.

The Bible tells me that if I resist him he will flee (James 4:7); that greater is He who is in me than he who is in the world (1 John 4:4); that I am not to give him a foothold (*topon*—place or opportunity) in my life; and that the means by which I deny him that foothold is by not giving into my own sins (Paul gives the examples of lying, anger, stealing, wholesome words, etc.) (Ephesians 4:25-29).

It would be wise of us not to overestimate, or underestimate the power of the devil.

I reiterate, I do believe there is a devil. The Bible teaches that he is as a roaring lion, walking about, seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8). Since Satan is not ubiquitous I don't

think that when we consider ourselves being attacked by him that we actually have his personal attention; perhaps we have the attention of one of his multitude of demons (Revelation 12:4). Nonetheless there is a devil. He is the father of lies (John 8:44), the accuser (Revelation 12:10), the source of great evil and one who seeks to disrupt the lives of God's children.

Heightened Sense of Attack

Since the devil is not omniscient, omnipotent or omnipresent it is reasonable to conclude that his attacks come in waves. Although it would be almost impossible to discern which enemy (the Bible speaks of three, the world, the flesh and the devil) is at the fore of any particular dilemma, there are times when there seems to be a heightened sense of attack—what I call 'peak season for sin and disaster'.

This heightened sense of attack might be a single dark and disastrous event or a series of events that make you think you're somehow in the devil's cross-hairs. You might find yourself the victim of illness, accidents, gossip, financial disaster, increased temptation, you name it!

These are the types of things that can be paralyzing when it comes to boldly advancing the word of God (Acts 4:29). These are the types of things that make us feel weak and ill-equipped. I remember going through a period like this many years ago just prior to a speaking engagement I had to address 200 men on how to be better husbands. I remember feeling like that was the last place in the world I wanted to be.

So what do we make of these seasons in our lives? Are we being punished for disobedience? Is Satan angry with us because we do not give him the credit he deserves? Is God angry? Should this launch us into a period of introspection and self-examination to find out just what it is about us, or what is wrong with us that we would be the target of such difficult times? Are there mystical and magical prayers, incantations or disciplines that I've been neglecting in order to ward off the devil?

I believe self-examination is a healthy thing (Psalm 139:23, 24). Praying, fasting, Bible study can, and should, be part of the Christian's pursuit of piety. And certainly, since sin has

consequences, we might seek to determine if our current difficulties are related to specific transgressions on our part. People who lie and steal shouldn't think it an odd thing to lose friends.

But it may be none of these types of things.

Does Job Fear God For Nothing?

One possible reason for difficult is that God is demonstrating that the truly faithful are truly faithful by His grace and not because of His circumstantial comforts. In Job we read of the Lord saying something to Satan in regard to Job that we hope He will never say in regard to us.

And the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered My servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil." 9 Then Satan answered the LORD, "Does Job fear God for nothing? 10 "Hast Thou not made a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? Thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. 11 "But put forth Thy hand now and touch all that he has; he will surely curse Thee to Thy face." 12 Then the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your power, only do not put forth your hand on him." So Satan departed from the presence of the LORD (JOB 1:8-12).

Not Always A Judgment

First of all we see that this eliminates the idea that difficult times are necessarily the judgments of God on unrighteousness. By God's own definition Job is **"blameless and upright" (Job 1:8)**. I don't know how many of us God would say that about, but

it is comforting to know that the difficulties we incur are not necessarily a result of God's judgment upon us.

Why Do We Fear God?

Secondly, we learn here that God will test people to determine and refine the substance of true faith. In doing so, God brings glory to His own name because the faith we have is His gift to us (Hebrews 12:2). Why do people truly fear God? Why do we continue to walk in faith? Is it because of the things God gives us? Are we faithful because of the creature comforts with which we are surrounded? Are some faithful simply because they are stronger or more righteous than others?

One of the most detestable heresies permeating our current Christian culture is the 'name it, claim it' cult. This brand of quasi-Christianity promises both health and material prosperity to those who are truly faithful. Health and wealth is used to attract its members and the lack of health and wealth is, no doubt, a main cause of its attrition.

So during our trial we must ask ourselves why we fear God or why we walk in faith. If God were to remove our every sense of comfort, our every source of joy, our job, our families, our health and any sense of well-being, could Satan say to God in regard to you and me "Does Paul fear God for nothing?" One commentary suggests,

Satan responded by attacking Job's motives: Does Job fear God for nothing? "For nothing" is rendered "without any reason" Because Satan could not deny God's assessment of Job's godliness, he questioned *why* Job was pious. The accuser suggested that Job was serving God not out of love but only because of what he got from God in return. If Job's rewards were removed, out would go his reverence¹.

No Mood to be Faithful

¹ Bible Knowledge Commentary

Some of us are barely hanging in there. I remember being in no mood to stand before a couple of hundred men and teach. Sometimes I'm in no mood to teach the Tuesday morning Bible study at the retirement home or go to the home group or the mission on a Wednesday night—those things aren't even part of my job description.

Sometimes I'm in no mood to prepare or give the sermon—no mood to answer the phone or to be in any degree cordial or congenial—no mood to meet with people and seek to give godly counsel—to write letters, return e-mail, etc.

I don't like looking at my pastoral position as a job as much as my calling and ministry. But sometimes I do things, not because of a heartfelt desire to help but because I know it's my responsibility. God doesn't always keep me in the mood.

If God doesn't keep you in the mood to pray, do you pray? If God doesn't keep you in the mood to be obedient, are you still obedient? If God doesn't keep you in the mood to attend church, do you still attend church? Is our reverence and obedience to God dependent upon how comfortable He is making our lives? It ought not to be this way. The commentary continues,

Satan's subtle suggestion that worship is basically selfish hits at the heart of man's relationship to God. The Book of Job does more than raise the question of the suffering of the righteous. It also, through Satan's words, deals with the motives for godly living. Will anyone serve the LORD if he enjoys no personal gain from it? Is worship a coin that buys a heavenly reward? Is piety part of a contract by which to gain wealth and ward off trouble? Satan suggested that if God removed His protecting hedge around Job and removed everything he owned, then Job would curse God. Job, Satan claimed, would no longer insert his coins of worship if nothing came out of the machine. Job, in other words, was worshiping for selfish reasons. This accusation also attacked the integrity of God, for it suggested that the only

way He can get people to worship Him is to promise them wealth. Perhaps this indictment against His character is one of the reasons God let Satan buffet Job. Surely God knew Job's heart, but He used Job as a demonstration to silence Satan. In addition, God wanted to deepen Job's spiritual insight.

Not an easy or enjoyable endeavor for Job. But God was honored and Job was refined—and the devil made it all possible. We learn here that God can use the devil to accomplish in us what we are incapable of accomplishing on our own. The devil, like the ungodly king of Assyria (Isaiah 10) is an apparatus in the hand of God.

In a moment I will seek to demonstrate how the devil is a profitable utensil in the hand of God, but first I would bring our attention to the Christians call to be holy (1 Peter 1:15).

Be Ye Holy

As a Christian, we are called to be holy. We are to play an active role in our growth—our own sanctification or holiness. We are called to put off the deeds of old man and put on the new (Colossians 3:8; Ephesians 4:20-24). We are called to work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12). Paul uses the illustration of an athlete:

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but *only* one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. 25 And everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then *do it* to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. 26 Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; 27 but I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified (1 Corinthians 9:24-27).

Paul states that he buffets his body and makes it his slave. To buffet means to handle roughly and in a servile (slavish) manner. The Greek word (*hupopiazo*) means to beat black and blue, to smite so as to cause bruises and livid spots. Like a boxer one buffets his body and makes it do what it ought to do. This is to be an aggressive action on our part.

The call to holiness is a two-fold call: It includes the avoidance of transgressing God's law and the pursuit of obeying God's law. The athlete doesn't just avoid doing wrong things, the athlete must also do right things in order to win the contest.

In this battle the Christian seeks to avoid the evils of selfishness, ungodly anger, lust, gossip, outburst, laziness, stealing, etc. The Christian also pursues that which God call us to. We are to **“visit orphans and widows in their trouble” (James 1:27)**. We are to study His word (2 Timothy 2:15 and fellowship with His saints (Hebrews 10:25), etc. And we are to engage this pursuit of holiness, as Jesus taught, with all **“your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30)**.

But we, more than not, find that our own pursuits of our own holiness woefully inadequate. It is for this reason—God's desire to make us holy—that He reaches into His toolbox and produces one of His most effective contraptions, the devil.

God's Instrument—The Devil

Paul wrote of buffeting his body. Though a sinful man, He had overcome so much: dangers, tortures, and other evils. He had triumphed over multiple enemies of Christ, had driven away even the fear of death (Philippians 1:21), had renounced the world. But there was a trait—that most evil of traits—that Paul's own buffeting couldn't cure. He could not subdue that baneful quality of pride.

What medicine would the great physician use to cure Paul of the deadly disease of pride? Paul would be cured by another poison.

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We have a medicine in our society called ‘antibiotic’. ‘Anti’ means against, ‘biotic’ refers to life—it is a medicine that is against life—it kills. There are many such medications (such as Chemo-therapy) which might cause great destruction to the body in order for the healing to take place. We see in this next passage that what Paul could not accomplish in his own disciplines, God accomplished for him. Paul’s temptation to exalt himself was due to wonderful and godly things God had revealed to him.

And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me to keep me from exalting myself (2 Corinthians 12:7)!

Again we see buffeting. And although the actual word for buffet in this passage (*kolaphizo*) is not the exact same word used earlier, the idea is the same—to maltreat, or treat with violence.

When Paul became ineffective at buffeting himself, God sent one who would strike him with greater effectiveness. The obvious question (one that is seldom asked when this passage is quoted) is what concern Satan has with the humility of Paul. Why would Satan wish to keep Paul humble?

Obviously, Satan’s motivation was not to humble Paul but to destroy Paul—to ruin his ministry and if possible his life. But, my brothers and sisters, Satan can not ruin our lives. He can only tempt us not to trust God. But we, like Paul, must learn that the grace of God is **“sufficient”** for His **“strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9)**. And we must learn this—and this is of critical importance—that Satan is the poison by which God cures. As Augustine stated,

“the poison of pride...cannot be cured except by poison.”

Calvin states,

But what does this mean -- that Satan, who was a manslayer from the beginning was a physician to Paul, and that too, not merely in the cure of the body, but -- what is of greater importance -- the cure of the soul? I answer, that Satan, in accordance with his disposition and custom, had nothing else in view than to kill and to destroy, and that the goad, that Paul makes mention of, was dipt in deadly poison; but that it was a special kindness from the Lord, to render medicinal what was in its own nature deadly.

Similarly, after Joseph was mistreated by his brothers, sold into slavery, endured false accusations and imprisonment understood who was ultimately in control.

And as for you, you meant evil against me, *but* God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive (Genesis 50:20).

And cannot the same thing be said of the cross itself? Were not the events of the cross both the deadliest poison and the greatest cure? It was the devil’s plan to destroy (Luke 22:3); the actions of Herod, Pilate, the Gentiles and the people of Israel standing **“against”** God’s **“holy Servant Jesus.”** Was there ever a more poisonous conspiracy? But it was all God’s **“predetermined purpose”** to save the souls of the lost and bring glory to His own Name (Acts 4:27, 28).

Conclusion

In conclusion, let us take to heart that God is forming Christ-likeness in us (Galatians 4:19). And the holy dispositions that trials, even from the hand of Satan, produce in us are something that we could never produce in ourselves.

I remember standing before the brothers and sharing how husbands ought to love their wives. I remember a special sense of brokenness—one that my own personal disciplines could not accomplish. This was God's design in terms of my disposition. This is how He wanted me to feel when I stood before the brethren. And though it may have been the employment of Satan that brought these discomforts to me, it was ultimately the design of my Father in heaven and I find that not only consoling, but encouraging.

We may never, in this life, find out what it is that God is working in us through these trials. But that doesn't matter. We know that He is working. And as C.S. Lewis stated, **"We don't need to know what vitamins are in the meal for the meal to nourish us, we need merely eat the meal."**

The practical application for me at the men's conference was simple. Study, prepare and up and give the message; no matter how many hound dogs bark at the moon, it doesn't keep the moon from its course. It should be the same with you and me. It is our Father who owns the world and all it contains (Psalm 24:1). Satan, as far as you and I are concerned, is to be considered a scalpel the hand of God. The only disaster is when that defeated foe, through his lies, briefly wins a battle by tempting God's children to depart from their present course of trusting Christ and pursuing holiness.