

Biblical Perspectives: Trials—the Door to Opportunity

by Carrie Cavanaugh

This past year we have talked with numerous Christian leaders who are experiencing trials. Facing the results of the greatest financial recession since the great depression has caused many of us to confront new trials. It's only natural to be discouraged in the midst of a trial. And yet the Bible paints a picture of trials as the handiwork of God in our lives. If our lives were easy and we had no struggles, we would grow little in our faith, learn little about God's faithfulness and never experience the depth of life that God has planned for us. Instead, we see that God loves us enough to take us through challenges that He sovereignly allows in order that we might be molded and shaped into the men and women that He knows we were made to be. As Proverbs 3:11-12 says,

My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline and do not resent his rebuke because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.

On a larger scale this is true of Christian organizations as well. Times of hardship help leaders refocus both on their primary objective and the source of their strength. It's all too easy in the times of security to think that we are

the ones pressing the kingdom forward, but when we do this, we are only deluding ourselves. This is God's work and He's gracious enough to let us experience the wonder of partaking in it, but whatever we do, it is only effective

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because of His gracious empowering! For, "many are the plans of a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that will prevail," explains Solomon in Proverbs 19:21.

What a sweet gift it is that our Father has pulled back the curtain so that we can see that there is more going on behind overly restrictive laws, a moral scandal or shrinking budgets. In the book of Job, a story of astounding tragedy, we see that something greater was at stake than anything Job could have imagined in the midst of his personal grief. Likewise we need to keep perspective as we go to the office

each day, realizing that things of eternal significance are taking place, things that might not be reflected in end of the year reports or even ministry impact evaluators. Certainly those things matter, but God also cares about the refining work He is doing in your life and that of your staff. Don't underestimate this!

The Bible draws a very interesting link between hope and suffering. Romans 5:2b-5 explains:

And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

Suffering is the crucible through which God purifies our hope. That is when we are stripped of all the other things we set up as sources of strength in our lives, we learn where our true strength lies—in God. Since God will never fail us, we will never be disappointed again and this is a source of hope even in the darkest of hours.

The passage goes in Romans 5:6-8 to say:

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You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

What encouragement this is that God loved us when we were still in rebellion against Him. This makes His relationship with us unshakable and releases us from the burden of performance. This is hope.

James 1:2-4 paints a similar picture of the beautiful maturing work that God elicits through trials:

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

But the interesting thing is what James writes next in verses 5-8:

If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.

You and I know too well that we can respond two ways in the face of trials: we can respond in faith and grow from them or we can ignore what we know of God and then become embittered or frightened. But this passage also tells us that we can ask God for wisdom in these circumstances and when we ask we are asking of One who “gives generously” for His resources far outweigh our need.

Therefore, as you face trials, purposefully approach them with eyes of faith. Although they will be hard, there is yet hope and beauty to be found in the process. And be sure to make the most of the opportunity that the trial affords by responding in faith, humbly relying on your one source of strength and wisdom—God.