

March 10, 2002 by Steve Brandon



What Should I Do When Trials Come?

(Various)

1. Trust (Job 42:1-2; Genesis 50:20; Rom. 8:28)
2. Rejoice (James 1:2-4)
3. Learn (Psalm 119:67)
4. Trust (2 Cor. 12:7-10)

I had every intention on beginning the Sermon on the Mount this morning, but some of the circumstances in our church have led me to delay this one more week. As many of you obviously know, we are experiencing tremendous pressures at our church.

This week, I listed out all of the families in our church and put an asterisk beside those who were struggling in some way with employment difficulties. More than half of the families in this room are experiencing such a difficulty. Either you have no job, or you are looking for a different job, which pays better. Some of you are facing tremendous pressures at work. Some need your jobs to be more consistent in the number of hours you work.

On top of that, several of our families are facing extreme health problems.

These are very real issues in our church. We have two options: (1) we can simply smile and pretend that everything is OK and continue on; or (2) we can begin to put some of these issues in perspective. Obviously this morning, I would like to spend our time in the Word of God examining how exactly we should approach these trials in our lives. Next week, Lord willing, we will get to the Sermon on the Mount.

I have thought about what I can do to help you all. With regards to your financial difficulties, even if I would give away my entire yearly salary to help you, after a month, we would be right back in the same situation we find ourselves in today (except that my family would be hungry). I can't solve your employment (and financial) difficulties. With regards to your health difficulties, even doctors cannot ultimately solve your problem. Nobody can give you health, neither doctors nor I. But I can, as a minister of the gospel of Christ, help you to understand what to do when trials come upon you. This morning, I would like to give you a perspective on the trials that come upon us as we live.

I would like to answer one question this morning, which is the title to my message, "What Should I Do When Trials Come?"

If you are in a trial right now, (and I know that well over half of you are), the answer to this question will be directly applicable to you. You can leave this place this morning and apply these things right now. If you are not in a trial right now, someday you will be, and the answer to this question will be of great help to you then. You can take good notes and pull this sermon out when the difficulties come.

My heart as your pastor is that you would get beyond, "survival mode," which simply seeks to endure until the trial is done. Such a response, though natural for us, fails to see God's purpose for you within your trials. I know that trials aren't easy. They have been called, "the dark night of the soul." My heart is that you would see God's purposes in the trials in your life and respond appropriately when they come. So, "What Should I Do When Trials Come?"

1. Trust (Job 42:1-2; Genesis 50:20; Rom. 8:28)

There are two things we need to trust.

1. Trust that God is sovereign over all things.

If God is sovereign over all things, then certainly, God is in control of your trial that you are experiencing right now. Open your Bibles to Job, chapter 42. Job was no stranger to trials in his life. In fact the purpose of the life of Job is to teach us of God's sovereignty in the trials and difficulties that come upon us.

Job lost everything he possessed in one day. He was told by a messenger that the Sabeans came and stole his 500 oxen and his 500 donkeys (Job 1:15). Upon finishing his report, another messenger came and reported to him that fire from heaven descended and burned his 7000 sheep (Job 1:16). After these details, another messenger came to relate to him how the Chaldeans took his 3000 camels (Job 1:17). Finally, another messenger came to tell him of the mighty winds that blew down the house where his seven sons and three daughters were feasting.

Within the span of a few minutes, Job was informed of all this disaster. To personalize it, you might imagine that similar news came upon you. Your house burned to the ground. Your 401K fell to nothing when the Enron scandal was discovered. Your rental property was ransacked. Your children were killed by falling scaffolding from the John Hancock building. The book of Job discusses why this happened.

Finally, the answer comes in Job 42:1-2, "Then Job answered the LORD, and said, 'I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.'" In other words, my questions aren't entirely answered, but I know that God is sovereign and powerful over all. There is nothing that He attempts, which He cannot do.

Though Job discussed his situation for 36 chapters with some of his friends, Job still didn't have the answer why this happened. But, beginning in chapter 38, God revealed to Job how sovereign He was by asking Him a few questions. I have simply pulled out a few of God's questions to Job. God said to Job, ...

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" (38:4).
"Who set its measurements?" (38:5).
"Have you ever in your life commanded the morning?" (38:12).
"Can you lead for a constellation [of stars] in its season?" (38:32).
"Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, so that an abundance of water may cover you?" (38:34).
"Can you ... satisfy the appetite of the young lions when they crouch in their dens?" (38:39-40).
"Do you know the time the mountain goats give birth?" (Job 39:1).
"Is it by your understanding that the hawk soars?" (Job 39:26).
"Will you really annul My judgment? Will you condemn Me that you may be justified?" (Job 40:8).

Job finally said, "I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted" (Job 42:2). Throughout the entire Bible, this message rings loud and clear: God is sovereign. As Psalm 115:3 says, "Our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases." As Daniel records, "His dominion is an everlasting dominion, And His kingdom endures from generation to generation. And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, But He does according to His will in the host of heaven And among the inhabitants of earth; And no one can ward off His hand Or say to Him, 'What have You done?'" (Daniel 4:34-35). **There is nothing that happens that is outside of God's providential control.**

Turn over to Genesis 50 and verse 20 to see this another place. Perhaps you are familiar with this verse. It is really the summary of the life of Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. After Jacob's death, Joseph's brothers sought to make sure that they would be safe (Genesis 50:1-17). Joseph said to his brothers, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good."

I would have you notice that there are two thoughts here.

1. "You meant evil against me." The brothers of Joseph had evil intent when they sold their youngest brother, Joseph, into slavery. They thought about killing him, until Reuben persuaded them against that option (Gen. 37:21). Ultimately they sold him into the hands of Ishmaelites as a slave. They didn't have the good of Joseph in mind here. This wasn't a good career choice for him that they pushed him into. This was slavery. Their intent for Joseph was "evil."

2. "God meant it for good." Notice that the same verb is used. Just as the brothers had every intent to see Joseph experience hardship, so also did God have every intent to providentially use it for a good result. In this instance, it was "to preserve many people alive," ... some 20 years later (50:20).

Notice that the text doesn't say, "You meant evil against me, ... but God **allowed** it to happen for the good." It doesn't say, "You meant evil against me, ... but God **permitted** it for the good." Joseph didn't say, "You meant evil against me, ... but God **used** it for the good." It says, "God **meant** it for the good."

God intended and planned for this to happen, because God is in control of all things. God is sovereign over all things. And in times of trial, this gives us great reason to trust God during our trials.

I'll give you three examples of modern day people who all faced great tragedy and found their peace in the sovereignty of God. Perhaps you are familiar with some (or all) of them.

Example #1: John Piper. In 1974, his mother and father were riding on a tour bus in Israel. The bus collided head on with a van, carrying lumber tied to its roof. A four-by-four from the van broke through the windshield of the bus, struck his mother in the head and killed her instantly. John Piper relates that he had lots of unanswered questions about why this would happen. Yet, it was the sovereignty of God that grounded his comfort. He said, "Supporting all my unanswered questions, and calming my heart, there is the confidence that God is in control and God is good. **I take no comfort from the prospect that God cannot control the flight of a four-by-four.** For me there is no consolation in haphazardness. ... I never doubted that God was sovereign over this accident and that God was good. I do not need to explain everything. That he reigns and that he loves is enough for now" (The Pleasures of God, p. 68).

Example #2. Jim Bowers. Jim was a missionary to Peru. In April, 2001, he was travelling in an airplane with his wife, Roni, and his son, Cory, and daughter, Charity. The Peruvian Air Force mistook the missionary plane for a drug plane and opened fire. The plane was hit with several bullets, one of which went through Roni's back and stopped inside her baby, Charity, who was being held on her lap. They both were killed. At the memorial service, Jim thanked many, many people

for their help during his crisis. Then he said, "Most of all I want to thank my God. He's a sovereign God. I'm finding that out more now. ... Roni and Charity were instantly killed by the same bullet. (Would you say that's a stray bullet?) And it didn't reach Kevin [the pilot], who was right in front of Charity; it stayed in Charity. That was **a sovereign bullet.**" He went on to explain how God had given him, "inexplicable peace" in the situation (spoken at Calvary Church, Fruitport, Michigan, Friday, April 27, 2001. For a complete transcript, click [here](#)).

Example #3: James Montgomery Boice. Almost two years ago, he found out that he had a very aggressive cancer of the liver. Three weeks after its discovery, he spoke to his congregation for the first time about it. He said, "If I were to reflect on what goes on theologically here, there are two things I would stress. One is the sovereignty of God. That's not novel. We have talked about the sovereignty of God here forever. God is in charge. **When things like this come into our lives, they are not accidental.** It's not as if God somehow forgot what was going on, and something bad slipped by. ... God does everything according to His will. We've always said that. But what I've been impressed with mostly is something in addition to that. It's possible, isn't it, to conceive of God as sovereign and yet indifferent? God's in charge, but He doesn't care. But it's not that. God is not only the one who is in charge; God is also good. ... If God does something in your life, would you change it? If you'd change it, you'd make it worse. It wouldn't be as good. So that's the way we want to accept it and move forward, and who knows what God will do?" (Spoken at Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, May 7, 2000).

The sovereignty of God is not some pie-in-the-sky doctrine left only for the theologians to think about. The sovereignty of God is immensely practical. The practicality of this doctrine flushes itself out especially when we face difficulties. We are comforted to know that God is in control of the difficulties. The difficulties that we are experiencing at Rock Valley Bible Church haven't escaped God's notice. If you don't trust that God is sovereign over your trials, then you have a different God than the God of the Bible. If you don't trust a sovereign God, when difficulties come at you, you will have little ground of comfort.

There is another thing we need to trust. ...

2. Trust that God cares for His people.

Here we turn to Romans 8. In my three examples that I gave of those who found comfort in the sovereignty of God, notice how the goodness of God was intricately combined with the sovereignty of God. James Montgomery Boice said this, "It's possible, isn't it, to conceive of God as sovereign and yet indifferent? God's in charge, but He doesn't care. But it's not that. **God is not only the one who is in charge; God is also good.** Everything He does is good." John Piper said it this way, "Supporting all my unanswered questions, and calming my heart, there is the confidence that **God is in control and God is good.** ... That He reigns and that He loves is enough for now."

We don't simply need to believe in a sovereign God, but also in a loving God. This is the truth of Romans 8:28, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."

A good God who isn't sovereign won't be able to work all things for good. A sovereign God who isn't good won't care to work all things for good. We won't find great comfort in either of these possibilities. For us to find comfort in our afflictions, we need to have a God who is sovereign as well as a God who is good. The truth is that God is indeed both.

But notice my point. I worded it very carefully, "2. Trust that God cares for **His people.**" That is, God cares for those who "love God." That is, God cares for those who are "called according to His purpose." If you aren't one of "His people," you have no right to claim this promise.

I remember being at a funeral of an unbeliever and hearing the minister read this passage of Scripture seeking to give comfort to people, "We know that God causes all things to work together for good" and stopped. But the promise of God causing all things to work together for good comes only to those who meet the conditions of loving God and of being called according to His purpose.

The statement, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life," is true if you love God and are called according to His purpose. But it is false if you hate God and want nothing to do with him. God's plan for such a person is to spend eternity suffering in hell for their sins. Such isn't a "wonderful plan."

And so I ask you, "Do you love God?" Do you love the Lord Jesus Christ? Is your desire to see Him exalted? Do you "boast only in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 6:14)? If you don't love Him, the fact that He is sovereign won't help to comfort you one bit, because His hand is against you. Did the Egyptians find comfort in God demonstrating His sovereignty through the plagues? No, they found it terrifying, because He was against them. Why did the Gibeonites seek peace with Joshua? Because they knew of God's sovereignty and that God was against them! (Josh. 8:24). If you are not a child of God, you have no comfort in God's sovereignty, only terror, because His wrath is against you.

But clothed in the righteousness of Christ, we can be protected from His wrath and anger. Those who have seen their sin and have run to the cross for their sufficiency will love God for what He has done and will do for them. God's care for His people will work itself out in comfort during trials. So, when trials come, we know that God is orchestrating circumstances for good.

When temptations come, we know that "God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able" (1 Cor. 10:13). God is in control of the severity of your temptations. **He can** control it because He is sovereign. **He will** control it because He is good.

When financial difficulties arise, we know that "God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19). God holds the key to the storehouses. **He can** give you what you need because He is sovereign. **He will** give you what you need because He is good.

What Should I Do When Trials Come?

2. Rejoice (James 1:2-4)

James 1:2-4 gives us the following advice, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."

The sense here is that you should consider it "nothing but joy" when life's trials come upon you. What an absurd thought! You tell me, which one of you really embrace this? When life gets difficult, which of you stand up and say, "Praise the LORD!"? children, think about when you get a cut on your arm, do you consider it all joy? You probably cry, don't you. We adults do the same thing. In our sophistication, we don't cry, "Waaaaah!" but we do other things which lead to the same result: sympathy from others upon our difficulties. We naturally think, "rejoice when life goes well." How can this be? Why should we rejoice when we encounter our difficulties?

Verse 3 says, "knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance." You tell me, which one of you want endurance? You had better want endurance, because endurance is a good thing. James writes, "Behold, we count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful" (James 5:11). This is the same Greek word as found in 1:3, *upomonh* (*hupomone*), "to remain under." Job remained true under his trials and God blessed him by restoring his fortune twofold (Job 42:10). Many of us consider those who have endured among us as blessed, because of their endurance through the difficulty.

How does endurance come? It comes by pressure over time, which is exactly what trials do for us. The marathon runner doesn't show up the day of the race and say, "I'm ready to run!" The athlete needs to push himself in practice to get to the point where he can finish the race or play the whole game. The musician must practice and practice and get the fingers and the lips to work correctly that on the day of performance it will sound nicely.

But endurance isn't the end of it all. The athlete works on his endurance so he can perform. The musician practices so that he can perform. So likewise, the Christian desires endurance, so that when trials come upon him, he will respond with rejoicing, because he knows that he has seen God be faithful in the past and will trust God to be faithful in the future. The Christian with endurance will be able to say, "Here comes trouble. But I have run that path before. I can do it again. Praise the LORD!"

This is called, "Christian Maturity," which is where James continues in verse 4, "And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." This is talking about being perfect, being complete, being whole, which is "Christian maturity." Don't we all want to be here? Don't we all want to be mature believers in Jesus? Yet, which athlete really enjoys wind-sprints? We become mature by enduring in our trials. We need to learn to rejoice in what our trials will do for us.

What Should I Do When Trials Come?

3. Learn (Psalm 119:67)

Trials have a way of waking us up. On a few occasions while playing basketball, I have been hit really hard in the nose. The effect has been to get my attention. I may have been cruising through practice. But when I got hit, it really alerted me to what was happening. This is the heart of the Psalmist, "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your Word" (Psalm 119:67). God often uses trials in our life to get us back on the path. Where once we might be content to travel along a certain path, God shows us the lions in the path, and we head in another direction.

The afflictions that God brings are often a pressure cooker to show us our sin. Picture myself holding a cup in my hand. You don't know what is in it. All looks well from the outside. As long as everything continues to be smooth, I have no problem. But suppose that I bumped against something, or somebody bumped against me. What is inside will come out as the cup is jolted. Suppose that a slimy mud mixture came out of the cup. I have been alerted to the fact that everything in the cup is not so nice. I need to deal with it.

You are the cup. Trials are simply an agitation of your cup. What is inside of you will often come out. You may discover bitterness or impatience or anger or selfishness or other sin inside of you that you didn't realize before. The presence of agitation causes you to see sin to which you were blind before. Perhaps some of the trials that are coming upon you are giving you clear insight into your sin, which never would have been exposed apart from such a trial in your life. Rejoice that God has allowed you to see your sin more clearly than ever before. Repent of your sin. Cry to God for mercy.

Some of you are struggling with your attitudes in your current jobs. As employees, we know that we are to obey our bosses, "in all things ... not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord" (Col. 3:22). We know that in "whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men. ... It is the Lord Christ whom you serve" (Col. 3:23). God has given you a difficult employment opportunity for the purpose of maturing you. Perhaps this is an opportunity for the world to look at your attitude in the midst of a terrible job situation and wonder how you do it! Why are you so happy? Your job is so difficult! You can testify of the grace of Jesus, which sustains you in the difficulty.

Some of you are struggling with not having a job or with a job that isn't quite providing for all your needs. Perhaps this is an opportunity for you to learn not to trust in the riches or in the entertainment of the world. Jesus comforts the poor with these words, "Do not be anxious for your life, as to what you shall eat, or what you shall drink; nor for your body, as to what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, neither they reap, nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they?" (Matt. 6:25-26). When a job doesn't quite provide for you, you have the opportunity to decide which things in life are the necessities and which things in life are the luxuries.

Perhaps this is an opportunity for you to learn genuine humility. Those who have much can often think themselves to be so successful and filled with pride. But those who have little are often humbled by their poor circumstances. I believe that this is precisely the reason why Jesus said, "blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven" (Luke 6:20). I have seen those who have had successful jobs, living high and boastful in life, and being proud of their accomplishments, as if they didn't need God.

Some of you are struggling with your health. Perhaps this is an opportunity for you to learn that you are mortal. You have a chance to see your frailty. Moses wrote, "teach us to number our days, that we may present to You a heart of wisdom" (Ps. 90:12). The one who sees his or her own frailty and embraces it and understands it is a wise person. What happens when sickness comes to the one who realizes that health is in God's hands? This one will react appropriately to the trial. As Jesus said, "Do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28). Perhaps God has brought illness into your life to teach you of your frailty and turn you to trust in God instead.

I am grateful to God for the struggles that I have with migraine headaches. About once a year, I come down with a headache that will incapacitate me for about 24 hours. I take my medicine, crawl into bed, and say, "Yvonne, I'll see you in about 12 hours." I wake up and usually have a bowl of soup and some crackers and return to bed. Twenty-four hours later, I'm functional. Not great, but functional. I am reminded each time it happens that I'm not in control of my health. I am humbled and am forced to slow down. I have sought to proclaim to others of my trust in God to sustain me. I say to others, "God humbles me and reminds me that I'm not in control."

So, I exhort you to learn from your trials. If you are finding difficulty learning endurance, look to Jesus. Hebrews 12:3 says, "Consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart." Don't look to yourself. Don't seek to gut it out on your own strength, thinking that you can do it by yourself. We are called to look to Jesus, who is our faithful high-priest. He is the only One who ultimately help us. In fact, trials come so that we will take our eyes off of ourselves and look to Him. Financial trials get our focus away from the world to Him. Health trials get our focus away from our flesh to Him. Difficulties with others get our focus away from our fleshly attitudes to Him who always responded appropriately.

What Should I Do When Trials Come?

4. Trust (2 Cor. 12:7-10)

Trust in the sufficiency of the grace of God. Turn over to 2 Cor. 12. In the beginning of this chapter, Paul speaks about his wonderful vision that he has experienced. He didn't quite know whether he was out of body or not, but he was caught up to the third heaven and heard "inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak" (verse 4). It was glorious.

In verse 7, Paul writes, "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!" We don't know exactly what this thorn was, but we can say that it was a trial that came upon Him.

In verse 8, Paul continues, "Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me."

"God, here is this trial in my life, please remove it from me. It is causing all sorts of pain." God says, "No."

"God, here is this trial in my life, please remove it from me. It is giving me great difficulty." God says, "No."

"God, here is this trial in my life, please remove it from me. I just want relief from the heartache this is causing me." God says, "No."

Paul knew that God was sovereign and able to remove this thorn. Paul knew that God cared for him. That is why Paul prayed.

In verse 9, Paul gives us insight into why God didn't relieve Paul of this trouble, "He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.'" Though God could have removed this thorn from Paul (i.e. He is sovereign), He cared enough for Paul not to remove it from him, so that the power of Christ might be put on display, "power is perfected in weakness." When given a choice between no thorn in the flesh plus no glory to Jesus or the choice of thorn in the flesh plus glory to Jesus, Paul wrote, "Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me" (verse 9).

Perhaps your trial is continuing on. Perhaps you have entreated the Lord, not three times, but thirty-three times! But God has not removed the trial from your life. May I encourage you to trust in the sufficiency of the grace of God.

God's grace in Christ Jesus is not passive. We often think of it as a synonym with "mercy," but it isn't. God's grace in Christ is an active! As Paul says here, it is powerful to work in him the ability to overcome the thorn in the flesh. To trust in the sufficiency of the grace of God doesn't mean that you are passive to the trials that come your way. Rather, it is God's grace that empowers you to respond appropriately to difficulties at work, or to respond appropriately to pressures at home, or to continue to look for a job, or to rejoice in the difficulties of your failing body.

It was God's grace that empowered Paul to labor more than all of the apostles (1 Cor. 15:10). And so, this morning, as many of us are facing

the trials of life, may we ...

Trust ... in God's sovereignty and in God's love for His people

Rejoice ... in God's plan to bring us to maturity.

Learn ... in God's classroom each of our particular lessons.

Trust ... in God's sufficient grace to empower us to endure.

I believe there is no better way to finish this morning than by quoting verse 10, "Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10). Oh, may God delight to show the surpassing power of the grace of Jesus Christ in our lives as we trust Him in our trials.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on March 10, 2002 by Steve Brandon.

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