

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 9

Trials and faith

Many Christians have been taught that they are guaranteed a way to escape trials. They point to biblical promises that God will intervene for those who have faith in his Son.

However, God not only promises to help us in our trials—he also promises us trials! Christ did not come to bring us a trouble-free life. Instead, he warned us that we would have strife within our families because of him (Matthew 10:34-36), that we would have trials (John 16:33) and that we would be persecuted (John 15:20). We enter the kingdom through many trials (Acts 14:22), and every Christian will suffer persecution (2 Timothy 3:12). We should not think it unusual when trials afflict us (1 Peter 4:12). The fact that Jesus Christ suffered when he was in the flesh reminds us that we will also suffer.

Nevertheless, Scripture also says that if we ask for anything in Jesus' name, then he will do it for us (John 14:12-14). Well then, some Christians reason, we can ask for a trouble-free life, and if we have enough faith, then Jesus will make sure that we have no troubles.

John 14:12-14 says we can have anything we ask for. Can we claim that as a promise for whatever we want? No—in a passage like this there are unstated qualifications, qualifications that are explained elsewhere in Scripture. Consider for a moment this fact: Some Christians earnestly prayed that a certain person would be president. Others prayed in Jesus' name for someone else. Christians in each group prayed in faith, but Jesus did not answer all their requests in the same way.

The unstated qualification is that God answers only according to his will (1 John 5:14). God will not respond to prayers that violate his sovereign will. He often has reasons we cannot see. We do not know his will perfectly, and it is quite possible for us to believe something that is not true. Our faith is no guarantee

that the answers we seek will happen, since our faith may be mistaken. I have yet to hear of a literal mountain moving into the sea.

In various competitions and wars, some Christians ask God to give them victory; people on the other side ask the same, and God cannot give both of them what they want. We may ask God for a million dollars—many Christians have—but not receive, no matter how many things we buy “on faith,” confident that God will supply. We can have full confidence in Jesus Christ—confidence that he saves us—without having faith that he is a genie performing all our requests made in his name just because we use the right words and believe.

Faith and healing

Many Christians have firmly believed that God would heal a loved one. They prayed in faith. Some believed that they had confirmation from other believers or from other miracles. So they were genuinely surprised, even dumbfounded, when the loved one died. What they had believed with such certainty turned out not to be true. Their faith could not heal the person—only God could heal, and he chose not to, despite their prayers, their faith, God's love and God's promises.

When such disappointments happen, a new trial sets in. If faith in the healing turned out to be a mistake, what about faith in Christ? Was it also a mistake? That is one of the dangers of the “word of faith” teaching—it links faith in our Savior to faith in specific predictions. Did Jesus promise to heal every disease? He did not heal Epaphroditus, as least not as fast as people wanted him to (Philippians 2:27). Even in his earthly ministry, Jesus did not heal everyone (John 5:3-9).

Didn't Jesus suffer for us, paying the penalty of all

sin? Doesn't that mean that we have no reason to suffer? Some say so, but we should test this line of reasoning with another fact: Jesus died for us. Does this mean that we should never die? The penalty of sin has been fully paid, so we do not need to die. We already have eternal life (John 5:24; 11:26). But the fact is, every Christian dies. There is something wrong with the line of reasoning. We do not yet experience everything Jesus accomplished for us.

There will come a time when we will be raised imperishable. There will come a time when we never experience pain. There will come a time when we receive the full benefits of Jesus' redemption. But that time is not yet. Now, we share in Jesus' sufferings (1 Peter 2:20-21).

Jesus promised persecution, not freedom from pain and sorrow. When Paul was beaten, stoned, and imprisoned, he felt pain, even though Jesus had paid the penalty of all sin. Paul had great faith, but also many sufferings (2 Corinthians 1:5; Philippians 3:10; 4:12). Although Jesus atoned for all sin, Christians still suffer despite their faith—and sometimes because of their faith.

We suffer from persecution, and we suffer the incidental pains of living in a world in which sin is still common. Sin hurts innocent people, and sometimes we are the innocent people who are hurt. Sometimes it results in early death, sometimes in slow and pain-filled death. We may suffer physical damage from a burning, a beating, a car accident or asbestos fibers. Our health may suffer from exposure to cold, from smoke in a house fire or chemicals in our food. We may be hurt by wild animals, large or small, or even microorganisms. God has not guaranteed to protect all his people from all possible problems.

Is it always God's will to heal people who have faith in Christ? The biblical evidence is that he sometimes does, and sometimes does not. Stephen was killed, James was killed. Eventually all the first Christians died of something. Yet, how many times did God save them out of danger before they eventually died? Perhaps many times.

Have you ever wondered about preachers who claim to heal all infirmities, yet they themselves wear eyeglasses? There is no reason why biblical promises would apply to one kind of ailment but not the other. The scriptures sometimes cited in support of a

universal promise of healing do not make any exceptions for eyesight, age, accidents or anything else. Both Scripture and experience tell us that these verses were not intended as universal guarantees.

Some have been healed, sometimes dramatically. These are examples of special favor, grace and mercy. We should not take these examples of exceptional grace and create universal promises out of them.

And we especially should not imply that people who aren't healed do not have faith. Sometimes their faith is demonstrated through their suffering—they remain confident that God will do what is best for them. Whether they live or whether they die, whether they have prosperity or poverty, whether they are sick or in health, they trust in God. There is nothing wrong with their faith. What is wrong is a teaching that implies that they are somehow not doing enough.

Purpose of trials

Well, since God promises us trials, and he promises to help us in and through our trials, what are they for? Why does God allow any evil? We do not fully know, but we know that God does allow evil, and Jesus himself was willing to endure it, and he is still enduring it patiently. The Scriptures tell us about a few benefits of trials:

- “Suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Romans 5:3-4).
- “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it” (Hebrews 12:11).
- “You may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Peter 1:6-7).

In short, we learn things from suffering that we cannot learn from studying. Suffering shapes our character in a way that words cannot fully describe. Even Jesus learned from his sufferings (Hebrews 5:8), and we are also called to take up a cross and suffer with him. “If we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory” (Romans 8:17).

Trials are not pleasant, but we are comforted by the fact that God is at work in our lives, and he is able to retrieve good from all things. He has the knowledge and the compassion to work in our lives for his glorious purpose. We do not always understand what specific lessons we are supposed to learn from a particular trial, but the overall lesson is always to trust in God.

Often, a trial of faith is just that—a trial of *faith*. In trials, we must trust God despite our physical circumstances, and by trusting God, we are growing in our faith relationship with him. This is of infinite importance, since in Christ we are everything we can be, and without him we are nothing.

An untried faith can be weak. Anyone can persevere when things are good. A tried faith is stronger, and the bond between us and God grows stronger. God wants a personal relationship with his children, a relationship characterized by faith, trust and love. This bond of faith can be strengthened by our trials. Trials teach us to rely on God for our every need. Whether our trial is health, or money, or relationships, or a problem in the church, we are to look to Christ.

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