
Sturdy Faith: Faith that Lasts in Life's Storms



Robert G. Taylor, May 17, 2020

Introduction

When it comes to interpreting the motives of people, we are terrible.

When I was six, I went to a friend's house to play after school. His brother and a friend were there as well. During this time, the older brother's friend dropped some candy on the floor and my friend's brother dove for it.

I did what was reasonable for a 6-year-old boy to do. I went and tattled to his mother.

After a very short investigation, it was apparent my friend's brother was simply helping his friend find the candy.

I had missed the motive entirely.

But when we try to read the motives of God, it is even worse.

Why do things happen when life gets turned inside out, when life turns mean? Why doesn't God care? Why doesn't God fix it?

In Hebrews 12:5-13, the Hebrew writer wipes away the fog of misunderstanding off the Hebrew Christians' viewpoint to see what their struggles actually mean.

The Problem

The core of the problem is the problem of evil in the world. It is real. Wars happen. COVID-19 invades the world. Famine, poverty, and starvation stalk the earth continually.

But expectations collide with the evil. If God is in control, why does the world appear out of control? If God is a God of love, then why am I miserable?

It is a timeless problem.

Go back in time, before Abraham. A man named Job enjoyed a charmed life. He served God. He had a wonderful family, good health, and wealth and contentment.

His story begins behind the scenes with a conversation between God and the devil. The Lord brags on Job. "Have you seen my servant Job?"

The devil sneered. "Of course, he serves you. You have built a hedge around him. Take away his blessings, and he will turn on you."

The Lord gives him permission to do as he pleases, except he cannot kill him.

The devil's ugly finger touched Job's life in all areas. A servant ran breathlessly in and told Job, "Raiding marauders have come and stolen your flocks, herds, and camels and nothing is left."

With his exit, came another. "I have to report that your servants were struck by lightning and have all died."

Then, a third one came with even more tragic news. "Your sons and daughters were feasting together in a house. A windstorm came and felled the tower and they were all killed."

Even Job's body was not spared. Boils crawled over his body, so painful and irritating he could only gain relief by scraping with jagged edges of broken pots.

Life had turned upside down for Job. They assumed the righteous were rewarded and the wicked were punished. By that logic, Job must have sinned.

Yet for Job, this was unfair. He had not done wrong, he had nothing to repent of. If he had offended God, God needed to tell him.

The righteous suffered and the wicked prospered.

That's not the way it is supposed to work.

Or take the case of Charles Templeton.

In the 1940s as America was coming off the Second World War, two young evangelical preachers planned to preach crusades in the largest cities of America. They were both roommates and compatriots.

One was Billy Graham. The other was Charles Templeton. Of the two, Templeton was the better preacher. At one time, he hosted a TV show about Christianity on CBS.

It all went well...until...that Look magazine cover. (Look was a pictorial journalism piece published in the 1950s and 1960s.) One month it covered famine in Ethiopia. The cover pictured an Ethiopian mother holding the lifeless body of her child who had died of hunger.

Templeton stared at that picture. He needed an answer. The child died because there was no food. There was no food because there was no rain. Only one person can give rain. God.

What kind of a God lets a child die when just a little rain could save it? He could not fathom the sense of the cruelty of the moment.

So he walked away from faith into atheism. Later he would write a book defending his decision to leave God.

It all comes down to the simple idea of why God lets pain afflict people in this world. If God is in control, why is the world out of control?

It is something the Hebrew writer feels compelled to explain to people who have their world uprooted by persecution.

The Perspective

The Hebrew writer is encouraging continued faith in the face of suffering. He shows them other believers who have stood firm. He pointed to the example of Jesus and how he sacrificed in the face of injustice.

But he has to answer the question "why."

The problem is our perspective.

An infant examines his world by the minute particles. He sees each blade of grass, each piece of fuzz, and every grain of dirt.

But as people get older, they widen their view and can see a bigger picture.

Tragically, most humans have a spiritually infantile view. We want what is in front of our nose and we want it now. Like an infant who is wet and hungry, we want immediate relief of our discomfort.

Christians have a choice of perspectives when it comes to suffering for faith.

One is to think God is out to get me.

Jonathan Edwards, the Puritan preacher of the 17th century, preached a sermon which has become a classic of American literature. The sermon is called Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.

In the sermon, Edwards portrays God holding a gossamer-thin thread dangling mankind over the pits of hell, waiting for him to fall.

It is a picture many people have. God is ready to pounce, pummel, and punish. All the bad expressed in a life is due to God's anger and displeasure.

But the other perspective is that God is out to love me.

This is where the Hebrew writer comes down on the topic. To clarify his point, he uses the analogy of a father and his son.

And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says, "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, (Hebrews. 12:5)

He says, "are you ignorant of the encouraging words of a father?" The word encouragement has tears in its eyes. It can mean beg or plead. When John uses it in his gospels, he gives the Holy Spirit the name Comforter, from the same word.

These are words of comfort given to Christians.

In the Roman world, the father had responsibility over his son for the son's entire life. Even as an adult, he was expect to maintain some control over him. Even in the case of a murder, the father had to pronounce the death sentence.

The truth is a father is always a father. He cares for his son, no matter how old he is.

For the Hebrew writer, the great fault of the Christians if they easily disposed of the notion of a caring father. They made light of it. They overlooked God's great care for them.

It comes in the form of discipline. Tragically, the word has been dragged into a narrow meaning of punishment. It means so much more. It is about shaping and training.

However, most of us learn best from consequences. As Mark Twain said, “the kitty cat doesn’t walk across the hot stove twice, but neither does it walk across a cold stove.”

Fathers do let circumstances shape. I heard of a father whose teenage daughter slammed her bedroom door. Instead of getting angry, the father patiently went to the garage and got his hammer and a screw driver. He went to his daughter’s room and simply took the door off the hinges and carried it to the garage.

The girl was furious at this invasion of her privacy. Her father calmly replied, “You can have your door back when you learn not to mistreat it.”

It solved the problem.

I have always observed that the best lessons I have learned in my life have come in the worst possible way.

So, the Hebrew writer wants them to understand this frame of reference to understand the meaning of life’s meanness.

But if God is a father, why does he let his children suffer, even when it is unfair and undeserved?

First, it proves the position of the son.

*...because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.”
Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? (Hebrews 12:6-7)*

Fathers discipline their own children, not strangers. No one sees a misbehaving child in a store and goes up and “straightens him out.” It is a good recipe for problems. But if it is your own child, you have the responsibility for their behavior. You care about what they will become.

But it is more than just sonship. It comes in the word “legitimate.”

If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. (Hebrews 12:8)

It's not about birth but about inheritance. The legitimate child could inherit his father's estate. In a Jewish family, a father would pass along knowledge of the Torah and prepare them for a trade. He was preparing them to enter his world as an adult.

This was Abraham's dilemma. The promise of God would flow through an heir. He thought he could make Eleazer his servant heir. Then, he believed that a legal arrangement to have a son through a handmaiden would provide the remedy. But Ishmael was not the "legitimate" heir. That was Isaac, the son of promise.

Those who are faithful feel the discipline of the father because he wants them to be like him. Like father, like son. After all, why should the son be treated different than the father? God is treated with contempt, ridicule, and apathy. His children will bear the same burden.

The second value of the suffering is that it refines character.

They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. (Hebrews 12:10)

God's character is special. He is distinct. He says he wants to confer or bestow his holiness to his people.

But this comes at a price. They must be made clean.

In 1848, James Marshall dug a nugget of gold out of a creek at Sutter's Mill in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. It set off the California Gold Rush bringing 300,000 treasure seekers to the coast.

But they did not find the gold laying on the ground. Instead they had to "pan" for it. It required them putting a pan into the silt of the river and shaking it until the silt washed away. Only then, did the gleam come through.

God is finding the gold in us but removing the silt of sin and selfishness.

We become holy by going through that which separates the filth from the finest.

But suffering points to another fact. God is preparing us for the future.

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)

I have a lot of respect for farmers. They are the ultimate risk takers.

Each spring, they begin with the seed and their hopes. Once planted, the problems come. Drought cooks the earth. Insects chew the crop and disease damages tender foliage.

He has to endure all of these problems. But if he does, there is a harvest.

The harvest of endurance is peace and righteousness, something they did not have in persecution. But endure it, and it will come in due season.

Living through produces the traits.

At the training academy at the New York Fire Department hangs that reads: Let No Man's Ghost Come Back to Say My Training Let Me Down.

It is a way of reminding them that the hard days of training pays off in a disaster. Be prepared is more than a motto. It is the insurance of the future.

Everyone wants to live like God wants them to live. The paradox is the only way to have that is to experience what we hate. Through the trials of life, we prepare for a better life. But it cannot be had without struggle.

So what do Christians need to do? It's not good information but a springboard to action.

Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. "Make level paths for your feet," so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed. (Hebrews 12:12-13)

The Hebrew Christians faced a crisis in their own lives. They were both feeble and weak spiritually. The words tell the story. They had limbs that would not work and they were paralyzed (which is the word in the Greek language). Like a person with a stroke, they had not strength to stomach the fight for faith.

Do those words hit home with you?

But it is not an accusation but a prescription.

He instructs them to strengthen what is weak. He wants them to rebuild and restore what they have lost. That is the point of chapter 11. Here is where you should be. Keep your eyes on Jesus. Find the internal stamina to go on.

But then, in a quotation of Proverbs 4:26, he also instructs to “make straight” their feet. The word “Ortho” is part of our word orthopedic, someone who makes you walk straight.

Something was off the path with the Hebrews. They strayed and lost their way. They need to get back on the path. Get strong and get back on track. Stop forsaking assemblies and pursuing ease. Instead, strive for faithfulness

It is easy for us to get on a crooked path. That’s when we need to be straightened.

In Aristotle’s famous Ethics, he uses the analogy of a warped piece of wood to describe human nature. In order to eliminate warping or curvature, a skilled woodworker slowly applies pressure in the opposite direction essentially, bending it straight.

So the Hebrew writer gives them the best answer to be giving. Repair the damage and start walking right. It is a personal responsibility.

Are you weak? Where? What do you need to “build up” in your spiritual life? What are you neglecting?

Are you walking crooked? Where are you off the path and what steps do you need to get back going “straight” again?

So, the question lingers. Why does God let pain infiltrate the life of the believer?

It is not to destroy or harm. Instead it is to grow and make better. The problems of life do not define us but they do refine us.

The strange idea is that those who seek to avoid the pain are also avoiding the growth. For heaven leads through the fire. Are you willing to endure today’s discomfort for tomorrow’s glory?

It may take some pain but it is through the pain you are safe.

A Norfolk-Southern train was rolling down the rails of Indiana at 24 miles per hour. Suddenly the conductor, Robert Mohr, spotted an object on the tracks roughly a city block away. Initially the engineer, Rod Lindley, thought it was a dog on the tracks. Then Mohr screamed, "That's a baby!"

The baby was 19-month-old Emily Marshall, who had wandered away from home while her mother planted flowers in her yard.

Lindley hit the brakes. Mohr bolted out the door and raced along a ledge to the front of the engine. He realized there was no time to jump ahead of the train and grab the baby. So he ran down a set of steps, squatted at the bottom of the grill, and hung on.

As the train drew close to Emily, she rolled off the rail onto the roadbed, but she was still in danger of being hit by the train. So Mohr stretched out his leg and pushed her out of harm's way. Mohr then jumped off the train, picked up the little girl, and cradled her in his arms. Little Emily ended up with just a cut on her head and a swollen lip.

Sometimes, like this train conductor, God must hurt us in order to save us.