

GROWING THROUGH ADVERSITY

**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.**

JAMES 1:2-4

One of the many fascinating events in nature is the emergence of the Cecropia moth from its cocoon—an event that occurs only with much struggle on the part of the moth to free itself. The story is frequently told of someone who watched a moth go through this struggle. In an effort to help—and not realizing the necessity of the struggle—the viewer snipped the shell of the cocoon. Soon the moth came out with its wings all crimped and shriveled. But as the person watched, the wings remained weak. The moth, which in a few moments would have stretched those wings to fly, was now doomed to crawling out its brief life in frustration of ever being the beautiful creature God created it to be.

What the person in the story did not realize was that the struggle to emerge from the cocoon was an essential part of developing the muscle system of the moth's body and pushing the body fluids out into the wings to expand them. By unwisely seeking to cut short the moth's struggle, the watcher had actually crippled the moth and doomed its existence.

The adversities of life are much like the cocoon of the Cecropia moth. God uses them to develop the spiritual "muscle system" of our lives. As James says in our text for this chapter, "The testing of your faith [through trials of many kinds] develops perseverance," and perseverance leads to maturity of our character.

We can be sure that the development of a beautiful Christ like character will not occur in our lives without adversity. Think of those lovely graces that Paul calls the fruit of the Spirit in [Galatians 5:22-23](#). The first four traits he mentions—love, joy, peace, and patience—can only be developed in the womb of adversity.

We may think we have true Christian love until someone offends us or treats us unjustly. Then we begin to see anger and resentment well up within us. We may conclude we have learned about genuine Christian joy until our lives are shattered by an unexpected calamity or grievous disappointment. Adversities spoil our peace and sorely try our patience. God uses those difficulties to reveal to us our need to grow, so that

we will reach out to Him to change us more and more into the likeness of His Son.

However, we shrink from adversity and, to use the terms from the moth illustration, we want God to snip the cocoon of adversity we often find ourselves in and release us. But just as God has more wisdom and love for the moth than its viewer did, so He has more wisdom and love for us than we do for ourselves. He will not remove the adversity until we have profited from it and developed in whatever way He intended in bringing or allowing it into our lives. ✍

Both Paul and James speak of rejoicing in our sufferings ([Romans 5:3-4](#); [James 1:2-4](#)). Most of us, if we are honest with ourselves, have difficulty with that idea. Endure them, perhaps, but rejoice? That often seems like an unreasonable expectation. We are not masochistic; we don't enjoy pain.

But Paul and James both say that we should rejoice in our trials because of their beneficial results. It is not the adversity considered in itself that is to be the ground of our joy. Rather, it is the expectation of the results, the development of our character, that should cause us to rejoice in adversity. God does not ask us to rejoice because we have lost our job, or a loved one has been stricken with cancer, or a child has been born with an incurable birth defect. But He does tell us to rejoice because we believe He is in control of those circumstances and is at work through them for our ultimate good.


The Christian life is intended to be one of continuous growth. We all want to grow, but we often resist the process. This is because we tend to focus on the events of adversity themselves, rather than looking with the eye of faith beyond the events to what God is doing in our lives. It was said of Jesus that He “for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame” ([Hebrews 12:2](#)). Christ’s death on the cross with its intense physical agony and infinite spiritual suffering of bearing God’s wrath for our sins was the greatest calamity to ever come upon a human being. Yet Jesus could look beyond that suffering to the joy set before Him. And, as the writer of Hebrews said, we are to fix our eyes on Him and follow His example. We are to look beyond our adversity to what God is doing in our lives and rejoice in the certainty that He is at work in us to cause us to grow.

GOD WORKS THROUGH ADVERSITY

Fortunately God does not ask us how or when we want to grow. He is the Master Teacher, training His pupils when and how He deems best. He is, in the words of Jesus, the Gardener who prunes the branches of His vineyard. The healthy vine requires both nourishment and pruning. Through the Word of God we are nourished ([Psalm 1:2-3](#)), but through adversity we are pruned. Both the Hebrew and Greek languages express discipline and teaching by the same word. God intends that we

grow through the disciplines of adversity as well as through instruction from His Word. The psalmist joins adversity and instruction together in God's training process when he says, "Blessed is the man you discipline, O Lord, the man you teach from your law" ([Psalm 94:12](#)).

God is at work in each of His children, regardless of how aware of it we may be. One of the most encouraging passages in the Bible is [Philippians 1:6](#), "Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." God is at work in us, and He will not fail to carry on to completion that which He has begun. He will "work in us what is pleasing to him" ([Hebrews 13:21](#)).

Horatius Bonar, a  nineteenth-century Scottish pastor, wrote, "He who is carrying it on is not one who can be baffled and forced to give up His design. He is able to carry it out in the unlikeliest circumstances and against the most resolute resistance. Everything must give way before Him. This thought is, I confess, to me one of the most comforting connected with the discipline. If it could fail! If God could be frustrated in His designs after we have suffered so much, it would be awful!"¹

But God cannot be frustrated. He will carry on to completion

¹ Horatius Bonar, [When God's Children Suffer](#) (New Canaan, Conn.: Keats Publishing, Inc., 1981, originally published as *Night of Weeping*), page 30.

that which He has begun. As Bonar also wrote, “God’s treatment *must* succeed. It cannot miscarry or be frustrated even in its most arduous efforts, even in reference to its minutest objects. It is the mighty power of God that is at work within us and upon us, and this is our consolation.... All is love, all is wisdom, and all is faithfulness, yet all is also power.”²

That God cannot fail in His purpose for adversity in our lives, that He will accomplish that which He intends, is a great encouragement to me. Sometimes I do fail to respond to difficulties in a God-honoring way. But my failure does not mean God has failed. Even my painfully sharp awareness of failure may be used of God, for example, to help me grow in humility. And perhaps that was God’s intention all along.

God knows what He is doing. Again in the words of Bonar, “He knows exactly what we need and how to supply it.... His training is no random work. It is carried on with exquisite skill.”³ God knows us better than we know ourselves. What we think may be our greatest need may not be at all. But God unerringly knows where we need to grow. He carries on His work with a skill that far exceeds that of the most expert physician. He correctly diagnoses our need and applies the most sure remedy.

² Bonar, *When God’s Children Suffer*, page 31.

³ Bonar, *When God’s Children Suffer*, pages 28–29.

Every adversity that comes across our path, whether large or small, is intended to help us grow in some way. If it were not beneficial, God would not allow it or send it, “For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men” ([Lamentations 3:33](#)). God does not delight in our sufferings. He brings only that which is necessary, but He does not shrink from that which will help us grow.

WE LEARN FROM ADVERSITY

Because God is at work in our lives through adversity, we must learn to respond to what He is doing. As we have already seen in previous chapters, God’s sovereign work never negates our responsibility. Just as God teaches us through adversity, we must seek to learn from it.

There are several things we can do in order to learn from adversity and receive the beneficial effects that God intends. First, we can *submit* to it—not reluctantly as the defeated general submits to his conqueror, but voluntarily as the patient on the operating table submits to the skilled hand of the surgeon as he wields his knife. Do not try to frustrate the gracious purpose of God by resisting His providence in your life. Rather, insofar as you are able to see what God is doing, make His purpose your purpose.

This does not mean we should not use all legitimate means at our disposal to minimize the effects of adversity. It means

we should accept from God's hand the success or failure of those means as He wills, and at all times seek to learn whatever He might be teaching us.

Sometimes we will perceive quite clearly what God is doing, and in those instances we should respond to God's teaching in humble obedience. At other times we may not be able to see at all what He is doing in our lives. At those times, we should respond in humble faith, trusting Him to work out in our lives that which we need to learn. Both attitudes are important, and God wants one at one time and the other at another time.

Second, to profit most from adversity, we should *bring the Word of God to bear upon the situation*. We should ask God to bring to our attention pertinent passages of Scripture and then, in dependence on Him to do so, look for those passages. My first great lesson on the sovereignty of God is still stamped indelibly on my mind after many years. It came as I was desperately searching the Scriptures to find some kind of an answer to a severe time of testing.

As we seek to relate the Scriptures to our adversities, we'll find we will not only profit from the circumstances themselves, but we will gain new insight into the Scriptures. Martin Luther reportedly said, "Were it not for tribulation I should not understand the Scriptures." Although we may be going to the Scriptures to learn how to respond to our adversities, we find those adversities in turn help us to understand the Scriptures.

It is not that we will learn from adversity something different than what we can learn from the Scriptures. Rather, adversity enhances the teaching of God's Word and makes it more profitable to us. In some instances it clarifies our understanding or causes us to see truths we had passed over before. At other times it will transform "head knowledge" into "heart knowledge" as theological theory becomes a reality to us.

The Puritan Daniel Dyke said, "The word, then, is the storehouse of all instruction. Look not for any new diverse doctrine to be taught thee by affliction, which is not in the word. For, in truth, herein stands our teaching by affliction, that it fits and prepares us for the word, by breaking and sub-dividing the stubbornness of our hearts, and making them pliable, and capable of the impression of the word."⁴

We might say, then, that the Word of God and adversity have a synergistic effect as God uses both of them together to bring about growth in our lives that neither the Word nor adversity would accomplish by itself.

Third, in order to profit from our adversities we must *remember* them and the lessons we learned from them. God wants us to do more than simply endure our trials, even more than merely "find comfort in them. He wants us to remember

⁴ Quoted by C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), Volume IV, page 306.

them, not just as trials or sorrows, but as His disciplines—His means of bringing about growth in our lives. He said to the Israelites, “Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you.... He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna ... to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord” ([Deuteronomy 8:2–3](#)).

The “word that comes from the mouth of the Lord” in this passage is not the Word of Scripture but the word of God’s providence (see [Psalms 33:6, 9](#) and [148:5](#) for similar usage). God wanted to teach the Israelites that they were dependent upon Him for their daily bread. He did this—not by incorporating this truth into the law of Moses—but by bringing adversity in the form of hunger into their lives. But in order to profit from this lesson they must *remember* it. We, too, if we are to profit from the painful lessons God teaches us, must remember them.

I referred in an earlier chapter to a rather painful lesson I learned when I tried to subtly usurp some of God’s glory for my own reputation. God holds me responsible to remember that lesson. Every time I come across [Isaiah 42:8](#), “I will not give my glory to another,” in either my Bible reading or my Scripture memory review, I should remember that painful circumstance and let the lesson sink more deeply into my heart. Every time I stand up to teach God’s Word I should remember that lesson

and purge my heart of any desire to enhance my own reputation. This is the way adversity becomes profitable to us.⁵

Thus far we have considered profiting from adversity in a general way, looking first at God's working in our lives through trials and then at how we should respond to them. Now it will be helpful to consider some specific ends God has in mind when He allows adversity in our lives. Of course, we cannot cover all the lessons God intends to teach us through adversity, but these are some specifically mentioned or inferred in the Bible. Through studying these specific objectives, we should be encouraged to believe that God always has a reason for bringing or allowing particular difficulties in our lives, even when we cannot discern what His reason is.

PRUNING

Jesus said that "every branch that does bear fruit [God] prunes so that it will be even more fruitful" ([John 15:2](#)). In the natural realm, pruning is important for fruit bearing. An unpruned vine will produce a great deal of unproductive growth but little fruit. Cutting away unwanted and useless growth forces the plant to use its life to produce fruit.

In the spiritual realm, God must prune us. Because, even as

⁵ One method that helps us to remember God's lessons through adversity is to keep a record of them and review them periodically.

believers we still have a sinful nature, we tend to pour our spiritual energies into that which is not true fruit. We tend to seek position, success, and reputation even in the Body of Christ. We tend to depend upon natural talents and human wisdom. And then we are easily distracted and pulled by the things of the world—its pleasures and possessions.

God uses adversity to loosen our grip on those things that are not true fruit. A severe illness or the death of someone dear to us, the loss of material substance or the tarnishing of our reputation, the turning aside of friends or the dashing of our cherished dreams on the rocks of failure, cause us to think about what is really important in life. Position or possessions or even reputation no longer seem so important. We begin to relinquish our desires and expectations—even good ones—to the sovereign will of God. We come more and more to depend on God and to desire only that which will count for eternity. God is pruning us so that we will be more fruitful. ✍

HOLINESS

We have already seen in a previous chapter that another intended result of adversity is to cause us to grow in holiness: “God disciplines us [through adversity] for our good, that we may share in his holiness” ([Hebrews 12:10](#)). But what is the connection between adversity and holiness?

For one thing, adversity reveals the corruption of our sinful nature. We do not know ourselves or the depths of sin remaining in us. We agree with the teachings of Scripture and assume that agreement means obedience. At least we intend to obey. Who of us does not read that list of Christian virtues called the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control ([Galatians 5:22–23](#))—and agree we want all those traits in our lives? We even begin to think we are making good progress in growing in them.

But then adversity comes. We find we are unable to love, from the depths of our hearts, the person who is the instrument of the adversity. We find we don't want to forgive that person. We realize we are not disposed to trust God. Unbelief and resentment surge within us. We are dismayed at the scene. The growth in Christian character we thought had occurred in our lives seems to vanish like a vapor. We feel as if we are back in spiritual kindergarten again. But through this experience God has revealed to us some of the remaining corruption within us.

Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.... Blessed are those who mourn.... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” ([Matthew 5:3–4, 6](#)). All of these descriptions refer to the believer who has been humbled over his sinfulness, who mourns because of it, and yearns with all his heart

for God to change him. But no one adopts this attitude without being exposed to the evil and corruption of his own heart. God uses adversity to do this.

In making us holy, God goes deeper than just specific sins we may be conscious of. He wants to get at the root cause: the corruption of our sinful nature manifested in the rebellion of our wills, the perversity of our affections, and the spiritual ignorance of our minds. God uses adversity to enlighten our minds about our own needs as well as the teachings of Scripture. He uses adversity to reign in our affections that have been drawn out to unholy desires and to subdue our stubborn and rebellious wills.

But we often resist God's work in our lives. We shrink from the rod of God's discipline instead of seeking to profit from it. We are more desirous of relief from the adversity than we are of its profit unto holiness. But as we look to God to use His discipline in our lives, we may be sure it will in due time produce "a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" ([Hebrews 12:11](#)).

DEPENDENCE

Another area of our lives that God must continually be at work on is our tendency to rely on ourselves instead of on Him. Jesus said, "Apart from me you can do nothing" ([John 15:5](#)). Apart from our union with Christ and a total reliance upon

Him we can do nothing that glorifies God. We live in a world that worships independence and self-reliance. “I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul” is the motto of society around us. Because of our own sinful nature, we can easily fall into the world’s pattern of thinking. We tend to rely on our knowledge of Scripture, our own business acumen, our ministry experience, and even our goodness and morality.

God has to teach us through adversity to rely on Him instead of ourselves. Even the Apostle Paul said of his difficulties, which he described as “far beyond our ability to endure,” that they occurred so “that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead” ([2 Corinthians 1:8–9](#)). God allowed Paul and his band of men to be brought into a situation so desperate that they despaired even of life itself. They had no place to turn except to God.

Paul had to learn dependence on God in the spiritual as well as the physical realm. Whatever his thorn in the flesh was, it was an adversity that Paul desperately wanted to be rid of. But God let it remain, not only to curb any tendency for pride in Paul’s heart, but also to teach him to rely on God’s strength. Paul had to learn that it was not his strength but God’s grace—God’s enabling power—that he must depend on.

Paul was one of the most brilliant men in history. At least one theologian has said that if Paul had not become a Christian and had instead gone into philosophy that he might well have

surpassed Plato. God gave Paul an abundance of natural intellect, and God gave him divine revelations, some of which were of such glory that Paul was not permitted to tell about them. But God never permitted Paul to depend on either his intellect or his revelations. Paul had to depend on God's grace just like you and I. And he learned this through severe adversity.

I am a person of many weaknesses and few natural strengths. My physical limitations, though not apparent to most people, prevent my relating to other men through golf, tennis, or other recreational sports. I feel this keenly, and for some years I struggled frequently with God about it. But I have at last concluded that my weaknesses are actually channels for *His* strength. After many years, I think I am finally at the point where I can say with Paul, "I delight in weaknesses.... For when I am weak, then I am strong" ([2 Corinthians 12:10](#)).

It does not matter whether you are predominantly a person of strengths or weaknesses on the natural level. You may be the most competent person in your field, but you can be sure that if God is going to use you He will cause you to feel keenly your dependence on Him. He will often blight the very thing we feel confident in, so that we will learn to depend on Him, not on ourselves. According to Stephen, "Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action" ([Acts 7:22](#)). Moreover he "thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them" (-

verse [25](#)). But when Moses attempted to take matters into his own hands, God so frustrated his efforts that Moses had to flee for his life. Forty years later Moses still had no confidence in his own abilities, and even had difficulty believing that God could use him.

Paul experienced a thorn in the flesh. Moses saw his efforts to do something for God utterly frustrated and turned into disaster. Each of these men of God experienced an adversity that caused him to realize his own weakness and his dependence on God. Each adversity was different, but each had a common goal of bringing these men to a place of greater dependence on God. If God is going to use you and me, He will bring adversity into our lives so that we, too, may learn experientially our dependence on Him.

PERSEVERANCE

The recipients of the letter to the Hebrews were experiencing a great deal of adversity. The writer of that letter acknowledged that they stood their ground in the face of suffering, that sometimes they were publicly exposed to insult and persecution, and that they joyfully accepted the confiscation of their property because they knew they had better and lasting possessions ([Hebrews 10:32-34](#)).

To these people, who were experiencing such persecution and hardship for their faith in Christ, the writer wrote, “You

need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised” ([Hebrews 10:36](#)). And, “Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us” ([12:1](#)).

Perseverance is the quality of character that enables one to pursue a goal in spite of obstacles and difficulties. It is one thing to simply bear up under adversity. This in itself is commendable. But God calls us to do more than simply bear the load of adversity. He calls us to persevere (to press forward) in the face of it. Note how the writer of Hebrews focuses on reaching the goal: “When you have *done* the will of God” and “*run* ... the race marked out for us.” The Christian life is meant to be active, not passive. The Christian is called to pursue with diligence the will of God. To do this requires perseverance.

We saw in the first chapter one writer’s comment that life is difficult. It is really a series of difficulties of different kinds and varying degrees, usually experienced over a period of many years. It has often been observed that the Christian life is not a sprint but a marathon. But even those metaphors fail to adequately express reality. The Christian life could better be described as an obstacle course of marathon length. Think of a race course just over twenty-six miles in length. Add to it walls to climb over, streams to forge, hedges to jump across, and an endless variety of other *unexpected* obstacles. That is the Christian life. It is no wonder that someone has observed “few Chris-

tians finish well.”

But God wants all Christians to finish well. He wants us to run with perseverance, He wants us to persist in doing His will whatever the obstacles might be. William Carey, often called the father of modern missions, is a famous example of one who persevered. Despite a succession of unbelievable obstacles (including an unsympathetic wife who later became insane), he translated all or parts of the Bible into forty languages and dialects of India. And William Carey’s sister is equally an example of one who persevered. Almost totally paralyzed and bedridden, she lay on her bed in London and prayed for all the details and struggles of her brother’s work in faroff India.

Few people can identify with the perseverance of William Carey in either the incredible obstacles he faced or the amazing tasks he accomplished. But we should identify with the perseverance of Carey’s sister. She persevered in doing the will of God in her invalid state. She could not do much (at least what we tend to think of as much), but she persevered in doing what she could, in doing the will of God for her. And because she persevered in prayer, her brother was strengthened and enabled to persevere in his missionary labors in India. Carey’s sister did more than bear cheerfully her paralysis, she persevered in doing the will of God in spite of it.

You and I are also called to persevere. Each of us has been given a race to run, a will of God to do. All of us encounter

innumerable obstacles and occasions for discouragement. To run the race and finish well we must develop perseverance. How can we do it?

Both Paul and James give us the same answer. Paul said, “We know that suffering produces perseverance,” and James said, “The testing of your faith develops perseverance” ([Romans 5:3](#); [James 1:3](#)). We see here a mutually enhancing effect. Adversity produces perseverance, and perseverance enables us to meet adversity. A good analogy is found in weight training. Lifting weights develops muscle, and the more one’s muscles are developed, the heavier the weight he can lift.

Though perseverance is developed in the crucible of adversity, it is energized by faith. Again, consider the analogy of weight training. Although the weights on a bar provide the resistance needed to develop muscle, they do not provide the energy. That must come from within the athlete’s body. In the case of adversity, the energy must come from God through faith. It is God’s strength, not ours, that enables us to persevere. But we lay hold of His strength through faith.

We have already noted the writer’s call to perseverance in [Hebrews 10:36](#) and [12:1](#). Sandwiched between those two calls to perseverance is the well-known chapter on faith, [Hebrews 11](#). The writer is actually calling us to persevere *by faith*. His eleventh chapter is a motivational chapter, as he gives example after example of people who persevered in doing the will of

God by faith.

The sequence of putting *dependence* before *perseverance* in this chapter was deliberately chosen. We cannot grow in perseverance until we have learned the lesson of dependence. You may, for example, drive a dog sled to the North Pole purely by a self-energized indomitable spirit, but you cannot run the Christian race that way. If you are going to run God's race, doing God's will, then you must run it with His strength. Jesus said, "Apart from me you can do nothing," and Paul said, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" ([John 15:5](#); [Philippians 4:13](#)). Jesus and Paul state two sides of the same truth: without His strength we can do nothing, but with it we can do all we need to do. We are called to persevere—to do God's will despite the obstacles and discouragements—but in His strength and His alone.

SERVICE

God also brings adversity into our lives to equip us for more effective service. All that we have considered so far—pruning, holiness, dependence, and perseverance—contributes to making us useful instruments in God's service. God could have brought Joseph directly to Pharaoh's palace without taking him through prison. And He certainly did not need to leave Joseph to languish in prison for two more years after he had interpreted the cupbearer's dream. Joseph's difficult circumstances

were not necessary just for him to be in the right place at the right time. They were necessary to make him into the right kind of person for the responsibilities God would give him.

The Apostle Paul wrote that “[God] comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God” (2 Corinthians 1:4). Everyone faces times of adversity, and everyone needs a compassionate and caring friend to come alongside to comfort and encourage during those times. As we experience God’s comfort and encouragement in our adversities, we are equipped to be His instrument of comfort and encouragement to others. We pass on to others what we have received from God ourselves. To the extent we are able to lay hold of the great truths of the sovereignty, wisdom, and love of God and find comfort and encouragement from them in our adversities, we will be able to minister to others in their times of distress.

In commenting on Paul’s ministry of comforting, I have deliberately used the expression “comfort and encourage.” The Greek word translated as *comfort* in our Bibles may mean admonition, encouragement, or comfort depending on the context. Because God the Father is called here “the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort,” it seems our English translators have done well to choose the word *comfort* to express God’s compassion. If we are to minister to others in their times of adversity, we must first of all show compassion:

the deep feeling of sharing in the suffering of another and the desire to relieve that suffering.✍

If we are to really help another person in his or her time of adversity, we must also encourage that person. To encourage is to fortify another with the spiritual and emotional strength to persevere in times of adversity. We do this by pointing that person to the trustworthiness of God as it is revealed to us in Scripture. Only to the extent that we ourselves have been comforted and encouraged by the Holy Spirit through His Word will we be able to comfort and encourage others. Adversity in our own lives, rightly responded to, enables us to be instruments of comfort and encouragement to others.

THE FELLOWSHIP OF SUFFERING

The Apostle John, writing to the persecuted believers of the seven churches in Asia, identified himself as “your brother and companion in the suffering ... that [is] ours in Jesus” ([Revelation 1:9](#)). The Greek word that is translated as *companion* means a “fellow sharer.” It is a form of the word *koinonia* from which we get our word *fellowship*.

John identified himself as one who shared together with his readers in the sufferings they were enduring. He could understand their afflictions since he was at that time also suffering for the sake of Jesus. John was a partaker with them in their suffering and it was important to the effective communication

of his message that they understand that fact. In this verse, then, John introduces us to yet another way in which we profit from adversity: the privilege of entering into a special fellowship with other believers who are also in the throes of adversity.

Trials and afflictions have a leveling effect among believers. It has often been said that “the ground is level at the foot of the cross.” That is, regardless of our wealth, or power, or station in life, we are all alike in our need for a Savior. In the same way, we are all alike subject to adversity. It strikes the rich and the poor, the powerful and the weak, the superior and the subordinate, all without distinction. In times of adversity we tend to set aside such notions of “vertical” relationships and relate to one another on a horizontal level as brothers and fellow sufferers. John could have rightly identified himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ, as one in a position of spiritual authority over the suffering believers in Asia. Instead he chose to identify himself as a brother and companion in their suffering.

Trials and afflictions also have a mutual drawing effect among believers. They tend to break down barriers between us and dissolve any appearance of self-sufficiency we may have. ✍
We find our hearts warmed and drawn toward one another. We sometimes worship together with another person, pray together, and even serve together in the ministry without ever truly feeling a bond of fellowship. But then, in a strange way,

adversity strikes us both. Immediately we sense a new bond of fellowship in Christ, the fellowship of suffering.

There are many elements that go into the total concept of fellowship, as it is described in the New Testament, but the sharing together in suffering is one of the most profitable. It probably unites our hearts together in Christ more than any other aspect of fellowship. I'm reminded of one believer with whom I had a friendship for many years, but we were never close. Then adversity struck us both. Our circumstances were different and his adversity was far worse than mine, but in our efforts to care for one another our hearts were drawn together in a new and deeper way.

This chapter has dealt with various ways in which we profit from adversity. Prior to this section, we have considered ways in which we profit as individual believers, but in the fellowship of suffering we are looking at a way in which we profit as members of the whole Body of Christ. The Christian life is not meant to be lived privately in isolation from other believers. It is to be lived as members of the Body of Christ. God wants to use our times of adversity to deepen our relationship with other members of the Body—to create a greater sense of sharing together the life we have in Christ.

RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Perhaps the most valuable way we profit from adversity is in

the deepening of our relationship with God. Through adversity we learn to bow before His sovereignty, to trust His wisdom, and to experience the consolations of His love, until we come to the place where we can say with Job, “My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you” ([Job 42:5](#)). We begin to pass from knowing *about* God to knowing God Himself in a personal and intimate way.

We have just considered the fellowship of suffering among believers. In [Philippians 3:10](#), Paul speaks of the fellowship of sharing in the sufferings of Jesus Christ, that is, of believers sharing with our Lord in His sufferings. The passage reads as follows:

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.

This verse has given expression to the deepest heart cry of believers down through the centuries: the desire to know Christ in an ever-increasing intimate, personal way. I can remember as a young Christian being challenged to “know Christ and to make Him known,” and I can remember praying, because of [Philippians 3:10](#), that God would enable me to know Christ more and more.

I have to confess, though, that down deep inside it always bothered me a bit that Paul not only wanted to know Christ

Himself, but also wanted to experience the fellowship of His sufferings. To know Christ in a more intimate way and to experience the power of His resurrection in my life appealed to me, but not the suffering. I shrank from that.

But I have come to see that the message of [Philippians 3:10](#) is a “package deal.” Part of coming to know Christ in a more intimate way is through the fellowship of His sufferings. If we are to truly grow in knowing Christ, we can be sure we will to some degree experience the fellowship of his sufferings. If we are to experience the power of His resurrection, we can also be sure we will experience the fellowship of His sufferings. 🖋️

It will help us to appreciate the truth that Paul is teaching in [Philippians 3:10](#), if we understand that the suffering Paul envisions is not limited to persecution for the sake of the gospel. It includes all adversity that overtakes the believer and that has as its ultimate purpose his conformity to Christ, described here by Paul as “becoming like him in his death.”

Repeatedly in the Bible, we see men and women of God drawn into a deeper relationship with God through adversity. There is no doubt that all the circumstances in the long delay of the birth of Isaac and then the experience of taking his only son up to the mountain to offer as a sacrifice brought Abraham into a much deeper relationship with God. The psalms are replete with expressions of ever-deepening knowledge of God as the psalmists seek Him in times of adversity (see, for exam-

ple, [Psalms 23; 42; 61; 62](#)).

You and I obviously do not seek out adversity just so we can develop a deeper relationship with God. Rather God, through adversity, seeks us out. It is God who draws us more and more into a deeper relationship with Him. If we are seeking Him it is because He is seeking us. One of the strong cords with which He draws us into a more intimate, personal relationship with Him is adversity. If, instead of fighting God or doubting Him in times of adversity, we will seek to cooperate with God, we will find that we will be drawn into a deeper relationship with Him. We will come to know Him as Abraham and Job and David and Paul came to know Him.

We have seen some of the ways we may profit from adversity. Obviously we have not covered all the uses God makes of adversity in our lives, nor have we more than scratched the surface of those areas we have considered. Sometimes we will be able to see how we are profiting, at other times we will wonder what God is doing. One thing we may be sure of, however: For the believer all pain has meaning; all adversity is profitable.

There is no question that adversity is difficult. It usually takes us by surprise and seems to strike where we are most vulnerable. To us it often appears completely senseless and irrational, but to God none of it is either senseless or irrational. He has a purpose in every pain He brings or allows in

our lives. We can be sure that in some way He intends it for our profit and His glory.

CHOOSING TO TRUST GOD

**WHEN I AM AFRAID,
I WILL TRUST IN YOU.
IN GOD, WHOSE WORD I PRAISE,
IN GOD I TRUST;
I WILL NOT BE AFRAID.
WHAT CAN MORTAL MAN DO TO ME?**

PSALM 56:3-4

While this book was being written, my first wife, who is now with the Lord, was found to have a large malignant tumor in the abdominal cavity. After eight weeks of radiation therapy and another month of waiting, the doctor ordered a CAT scan to determine if the tumor had been successfully resolved. The day before she was to learn the results of the CAT scan, my wife found herself apprehensive and anxious over the news she would hear the next day.

For some days she had been turning to [Psalm 42:11](#) for assurance during this difficult time. The verse says, “Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.”

Turning to [Psalm 42:11](#) that day, she said, “Lord, I choose not to be downcast, I choose not to be disturbed, I choose to put my

hope in You.” She told me later, as she recounted this to me, that her feelings did not change immediately, but after a while they did. Her heart was calmed as she deliberately chose to trust God.

David, in his times of distress, also chose to trust God. In [Psalm 56:3-4](#), our text for this chapter, David admitted he was afraid. David was not cocky or arrogant. Despite the fact that he was a warrior of great skill and courage, there were times when he was afraid. The heading of [Psalm 56](#) indicates the occasion of David’s writing: “When the Philistines had seized him in Gath.” The historical narrative of that incident says that he “was very much afraid of Achish king of Gath” ([1 Samuel 21:12](#)).

But despite David’s fear, he said to God, “I will trust in you.... I will not be afraid.” Repeatedly in the psalms we find the determination to trust God—choosing to trust Him despite all appearances. David’s declaration in [Psalm 23:4](#), “I will fear no evil,” is equivalent to “I will trust in God in the face of evil.” In [Psalm 16:8](#) he says, “I have set the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken.” To set the Lord before me is to recognize His presence and His constant help, but this is something we must choose to do.

God is always with us. He has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you” ([Hebrews 13:5](#)). There is no question of His presence with us. But we must *recognize* His presence; we

must set Him always before us. We must choose whether or not we will believe His promises of constant protection and care.

Margaret Clarkson, in speaking of how we may arrive at a place of acceptance of adversity in our lives, said, “Always it is initiated by an act of will on our part; we set ourselves to believe in the overruling goodness, providence, and sovereignty of God and refuse to turn aside no matter what may come, no matter how we feel.”¹

For many years in my own pilgrimage of seeking to come to a place of trusting God at all times—I am still far from the end of the journey—I was a prisoner to my feelings. I mistakenly thought I could not trust God unless I *felt* like trusting Him (which I almost never did in times of adversity). Now I am learning that trusting God is first of all a matter of the will, and is not dependent on my feelings. I choose to trust God and my feelings eventually follow. 🖋️

Having said that trusting God is first of all a matter of the will, let me qualify that statement to say that, first of all, it is a matter of knowledge. We must *know* that God is sovereign, wise, and loving—in all the ways we have come to see what those terms mean in previous chapters. But having been exposed to the knowledge of the truth, we must then choose

¹ Clarkson, *Grace Grows Best in Winter*, page 21.

whether to believe the truth about God, which He has revealed to us, or whether to follow our feelings. If we are to trust God, we must choose to believe His truth. We must say, “I will trust You though I do not feel like doing so.”

BE WILLING TO BELIEVE

To trust God in times of adversity is admittedly a hard thing to do. I do not mean to suggest in my emphasis on choosing to trust God that the choice is as easy as choosing whether or not I will go to the store, or even choosing whether or not I will do some sacrificial deed. Trusting God is a matter of faith, and faith is the fruit of the Spirit ([Galatians 5:22](#)). Only the Holy Spirit can make His Word come alive in our hearts and create faith, but we can choose to look to Him to do that, or we can choose to be ruled by our feelings of anxiety or resentment or grief. 🖋

John Newton, author of the hymn “Amazing Grace,” watched cancer slowly and painfully kill his wife over a period of many months. In recounting those days, John Newton said:

I believe it was about two or three months before her death, when I was walking up and down the room, offering disjointed prayers from a heart torn with distress, that a thought suddenly struck me, with unusual force, to this effect—“The promises of God must be true; surely

the Lord will help me, *if I am willing to be helped!*” It occurred to me, that we are often led ... [from an undue regard of our feelings], to indulge that unprofitable grief which both our duty and our peace require us to resist to the utmost of our power. I instantly said aloud, “Lord, I am helpless indeed, in myself, but I hope I am willing, without reserve, that thou shouldest help me.”²

John Newton was helped in a remarkable way. During those remaining months he tended to his usual duties as an Anglican minister and was able to say, “Through the whole of my painful trial, I attended all my stated and occasional services, as usual; and a stranger would scarcely have discovered, either by my words or looks, that I was in trouble. [The long affliction] did not prevent me from preaching a single sermon, and I preached on the day of her death.... I likewise preached three times while she lay dead in the house.... And after she was deposited in the vault, I preached her funeral sermon.”³

How was John Newton helped? First he chose to be helped. He realized it was his duty to resist “to the utmost of our power” an inordinate amount of grief and distraction. He realized it was sinful to wallow in self-pity. Then he turned to the Lord, not even asking, but only indicating his *willingness* to be

² Newton, *The Works of John Newton*, Volume 5, pages 621–622.

³ Newton, *The Works of John Newton*, Volume 5, pages 622–623.


helped. Then he said, “I was not supported by lively sensible consolations, but by being enabled to realize to my mind some great and leading truths of the word of God.”⁴ The Spirit of God helped him by making needed truths of Scripture alive to him. He chose to trust God, he turned to God in an attitude of dependence, and he was enabled to realize certain great truths of Scripture. Choice, prayer, and the Word of God were the crucial elements of his being helped to trust God.

The same David who said in [Psalm 56:4](#), “In God I trust; I will not be afraid” said in [Psalm 34:4](#), “I sought the Lord, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears.” There is no conflict between saying, “I will not be afraid” and asking God to deliver us from our fears. David recognized it was his responsibility to choose to trust God, but also that he was dependent upon the Lord for the ability to do it.

Whenever I teach on the subject of personal holiness, I always stress that we are *responsible* to obey the will of God, but that we are *dependent* upon the Holy Spirit for the enabling power to do it. The same principle applies in the realm of trusting God. We are responsible to trust Him in times of adversity but we are dependent upon the Holy Spirit to enable us to do so.

Again, let me emphasize that trusting God does not mean we

⁴ Newton, *The Works of John Newton*, Volume 5, pages [623–624](#).

do not experience pain. It means we believe that God is at work through the occasion of our pain for our ultimate good. It means we work back through the Scriptures regarding His sovereignty, wisdom, and goodness and ask Him to use those Scriptures to bring peace and comfort to our hearts. It means, above all, that we do not sin against God by allowing distrustful and hard thoughts about Him to hold sway in our minds. It will often mean that we may have to say, “God I don’t understand, but I trust You.” 

GOD IS TRUSTWORTHY

The whole idea of trusting God is, of course, based upon the fact that God is absolutely trustworthy. That is why we spent twelve chapters of this book studying the sovereignty, wisdom, and love of God. We must be firmly grounded in those scriptural truths if we are to trust Him.

We must also lay hold of some of the great promises of His constant care for us. One such promise we will do well to store up in our hearts is [Hebrews 13:5](#): “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” The Puritan preacher Thomas Lye remarked that in this passage the Greek has five negatives and may thus be rendered, “I will not, not leave thee; neither will I not, not forsake thee.”⁵ Five times God emphasized to us that He will

⁵ *Puritan Sermons 1659–1689*, Volume 1, page 378.

not forsake us. He wants us to firmly grasp the truth that whatever circumstances may indicate, we must believe, on the basis of His promise, that He has not forsaken us or left us to the mercy of those circumstances.

We may sometimes lose the *sense* of God's presence and help but we never lose them. Job, in his distress, could not find God. He said:

“But if I go to the east, he is not there;
if I go to the west, I do not find him.
When he is at work in the north, I do not see him;
when he turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of him.
But he knows the way that I take;
when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold.”
(Job 23:8-10)

In previous chapters we have seen lessons from some of Job's struggles to trust God. Job apparently wavered, as we do, between trust and doubt. Here we see a strong affirmation of trust. He couldn't find God anywhere. God had completely withdrawn from Job the comforting sense of His presence. But Job believed, though he couldn't see Him, that God was watching over him, and would bring him through that trial as purified gold.

You and I will sometimes have the same experience as Job—perhaps not in the same kind or intensity of

sufferings—but in the seeming inability to find God anywhere. God will seem to hide Himself from us. Even the prophet Isaiah said to God on one occasion, “Truly you are a God who hides himself, O God and Savior of Israel” ([Isaiah 45:15](#)). We should learn from Job and Isaiah, so that we are not totally surprised and dismayed when, in the time of our distress, we can’t seem to find God. At these times we must cling to His bare but inviolate promise, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”

The Apostle Paul speaks of “God, who does not lie” ([Titus 1:2](#)). This is the God who has promised, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” He may hide Himself from our sense of His presence, but He never allows our adversities to hide us from Him. He may allow us to pass through the deep waters and the fire, but He will be with us in them ([Isaiah 43:2](#)).

Because God will never leave you nor forsake you, you are invited in the words of Peter to “cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” ([1 Peter 5:7](#)). This is a passage of Scripture that is very familiar to many of us, in fact it seems too familiar. Some passages of Scripture like this one seem so familiar, and consequently so elementary, that we often pass right by them. It is almost like knowing that one plus one equals two. That’s for first graders! But it also happens to be the most foundational truth in mathematics. Without that truth we couldn’t have algebra, calculus, and all higher forms of mathematics.

Let's go back then and take a deeper look at [1 Peter 5:7](#). God cares for you! Not only will He never leave you—that's the negative side of the promise—but He cares for you. He is not just there with you, He cares for you. His care is constant—not occasional or sporadic. His care is total—even the very hairs of your head are numbered. His care is sovereign—nothing can touch you that He does not allow. His care is infinitely wise and good so that again in the words of John Newton, "If it were possible for me to alter any part of his plan, I could only spoil it."⁶

We must learn to cast our anxieties on Him. Dr. John Brown says of this verse, "The figurative expression 'cast,' not lay, seems to intimate that the duty enjoined is one that requires an effort; and experience tells us it is no easy matter to throw off the burden of carefulness."⁷ So we are back to the matter of choice. We must by an act of the will in dependence on the Holy Spirit say something such as, "Lord, I choose to cast off this anxiety onto You, but I cannot do this of myself. I will trust You by Your Spirit to enable me to, having cast my anxiety on You, not to take it back upon myself."

Trust is not a passive state of mind. It is a vigorous act of the

⁶ Newton, *The Works of John Newton*, Volume 5, page [624](#).

⁷ Brown, *Expository Discourses on 1 Peter* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975, first published 1848), Volume 2, page 539.

soul by which we choose to lay hold on the promises of God and cling to them despite the adversity that at times seeks to overwhelm us. 📌

Several years ago I encountered a series of related difficulties within a few days. Not major calamities, but of a nature as to cause me great distress. At the outset, the verse [Psalm 50:15](#) came to my mind, “Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me.” I began to call upon God asking Him to deliver me, but it seemed the more I called, the more the difficulties came.

I began to wonder if God’s promises had any real meaning. Finally one day I said to God, “I will take You at Your Word. I will believe that in Your time and in Your way, You will deliver me.” The difficulties did not cease, but the peace of God did quiet my fears and anxieties. And then, in due time, God did deliver me from those troubles, and He did it in such a way that I knew He had done it. God’s promises are true. They cannot fail because He cannot lie. But, to realize the peace they are intended to give, we must choose to believe them. We must cast our anxieties upon Him.

PITFALLS IN TRUSTING

As difficult as it is to trust God in times of adversity, there are other times when it may be even more difficult to trust Him. These would be times when circumstances are going well,

when, to use David's expression, "The boundary lines have fallen ... in pleasant places" ([Psalm 16:6](#)). During times of temporal blessings and prosperity, we are prone to put our trust in those blessings, or even worse, in ourselves as the providers of those blessings.

During times of prosperity and favorable circumstances, we show our trust in God by acknowledging Him as the provider of all those blessings. We have already seen that God caused the nation of Israel to hunger in the desert and then fed them with manna from Heaven in order to teach them "that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" ([Deuteronomy 8:3](#)).

So how about us with our cupboards and refrigerators filled with food for tomorrow's meals? We are just as dependent upon God as the Israelites were. God rained down manna for them each day. For us He may provide a regular paycheck and plenty of food at the supermarket ready for us to buy. He provided the Israelites' food through a miracle. He provides our food through a long and complex chain of natural events in which His hand is visible only to the eye of faith. But it is still His provision just as much as was the manna from Heaven.

How often are our expressions of thanksgiving at meal-times hardly more than a perfunctory ritual with little genuine feeling? How often do we stop to acknowledge God's hand of provision and to thank Him for other temporal blessings such

as the clothes we wear, the house we live in, the car we drive, the health we enjoy? The extent to which we genuinely thank God for the blessings He does provide is an indicator of our trust in Him. We ought to be as earnest and frequent in our prayers of thanksgiving when the cupboard is full as we would be in our prayers of supplication if the cupboards were bare. That is the way we show our trust in times of prosperity and blessing.

Solomon said, “When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other” ([Ecclesiastes 7:14](#)). God makes the good times as well as the bad times. In adversity we tend to doubt God’s fatherly care, but in prosperity we tend to forget it. If we are to trust God, we must acknowledge our dependence upon Him at all times, good times as well as bad times.

Another pitfall we need to watch for is the tendency to trust in God’s instruments of provision rather than in God Himself. In the usual course of events in our lives, God provides for our needs through human means rather than directly. He provides for our financial needs through our vocations and gives us medical personnel to treat us when we are ill. But these human instruments are ultimately under the controlling hand of God. They succeed or prosper only to the extent God prospers them. We must be careful to look beyond the means and human instrumentalities to the God who uses them.

In [Proverbs 18:10–11](#), there is a very interesting and instructive contrast drawn between the righteous and the rich. The passage says:

The name of the Lord is a strong tower;
the righteous run to it and are safe.
The wealth of the rich is their fortified city;
they imagine it an unscalable wall.

The contrast is not between the righteous and the rich in an absolute sense, as there are many people who are both righteous and wealthy. Rather we should see the contrast drawn between the two primary objects of man's trust: God and money. Those who trust in the Lord *are* safe; while those who trust in their wealth only *imagine* they are safe.

There is a much wider principle for us in this passage. All of us tend to have our fortified cities. It may be an advanced college degree with its ticket to a guaranteed position, or our insurance policies, or our financial nest egg for retirement years. For our nation, it is our military build-up. Anything other than God Himself that we tend to trust in becomes our “fortified city” with its imagined unscalable walls.

This does not mean we are to disregard the usual means of supply God has provided. It means we must not trust in them. Earlier we saw that the psalmist said, “I do not trust in my bow” ([Psalm 44:6](#)), but he did not say, “I have thrown it away.”

To put the use of ordinary means and a trust in God into proper perspective is to look in trust to God to *use* the means He has provided. At the time of this writing, my wife is experiencing some physical pain, possibly an outgrowth of her bout with cancer. While we are seeking an expert medical diagnosis as to the cause of the pain, we are looking to God that, according to His will, He will give wisdom and guidance to the doctors. Though we respect the medical skill of the physicians, we know God has given them that skill and that only He can prosper that skill in any given situation. So we respect and appreciate the doctors, but we trust in God.

Human means and instrumentalities can be depended upon only insofar as we recognize and honour God in them. Philip Bennett Power, a nineteenth-century Anglican minister, wrote, “We cannot expect God to prosper anything which intrudes itself into His place, and detracts from His honour.... [We must] make God the great object of our trust, *even though the usual human instrumentality of help may be at hand.*”⁸

We should also keep in mind that God is able to work with or without human means. Though He most often uses them, He is not dependent upon them. Furthermore, He will frequently use some means altogether different from that which we

⁸ Philip Bennett Power, *The “I Wills” of The Psalms* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985, first published 1858), pages 10 and 8.

would have expected. Sometimes our prayers for deliverance from some particular strait are accompanied by faith to the extent we can foresee some predictable means of deliverance. But God is not dependent upon means that we can foresee. In fact, it seems from experience that God delights to surprise us by His ways of deliverance to remind us that our trust must be in Him and Him alone.

Still another pitfall to trusting God, which we are prone to fall into, is to turn to God in trust in the greater crisis experiences of life while seeking to work through the minor difficulties ourselves. A disposition to trust in ourselves is part of our sinful nature. It sometimes takes a major crisis, or at least a moderate one, to turn us toward the Lord. A mark of Christian maturity is to continually trust the Lord in the minutiae of daily life. If we learn to trust God in the minor adversities, we will be better prepared to trust Him in the major ones.

Quoting again from Philip Bennett Power:

The daily circumstances of life will afford us opportunities enough of glorifying God in Trust, without our waiting for any extraordinary calls upon our faith. Let us remember that the extraordinary circumstances of life are but few; that much of life may slip past without their occurrence; and that if we be not faithful and trusting in that which is little, we are not likely to be so in that which

is great.... Let our trust be reared in the humble nursery of our own daily experience, with its ever recurring little wants, and trials, and sorrows; and then, when need be, it will come forth, to do such great things as are required of it.⁹

I once asked a dear saint of God who has experienced much adversity whether she found it as difficult to trust God in the minor difficulties of life as in the major ones. She replied that she found the minor ones more difficult. In times of major crisis she readily realized her utter dependence on God and quickly turned to Him, but she often tried to work through the more ordinary adversities herself. Let us learn from her experience and seek to trust God in the ordinary circumstances of life.

But whether the difficulty is major or minor, we must choose to trust God. We must learn to say with the psalmist, “When I am afraid, I will trust in you.”

⁹ Power, *The “I Wills” of The Psalms*, page 63.