

Trial By Fire

God's Providence and Trials

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There's a direct connection between this sermon and my first day of Unleavened Bread sermon ["Mercy, Pilgrimage, and Providence"]; however, they are not exactly on the same subject. This sermon is a natural progression in thought from that one.

Both messages are developed around three factors. The first factor is found in Hebrews 4:12-13:

Hebrews 4:12-13 "For the word of God is quick and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in His sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of Him with whom we have to do."

The first factor, that is part of both of these sermons, is God's omniscience—He knows what is going on; He is not hidden from the things that are happening in His creation.

We must understand especially that He is very aware of what is going on in our life! I think that was illustrated very clearly by Richard's sermon subject this morning—talking about the presence of God being clearly visible to those who were in the wilderness ["The Glory of God (Part 1): The Shekinah"]. That shows you and me, at least symbolically, that God is close at hand. He's not removed way off.

In Deuteronomy 30:11, He says the Word isn't far from you. It's right here! You don't have to go traveling off to outer space to get it. He is right here. God is omniscient.

The second factor is found in the book of Romans; those verses that we were considering on the first Day of Unleavened Bread.

Romans 8:28-32 "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren. Moreover whom He did predestinate, them He also called: and whom He

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called, them He also justified: and whom he justified, them He also glorified. What shall we say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?"

Those verses essentially cover God's assurance to those who have needs within the trials that are a part of His purpose. That's the second factor. We have God's omniscience. Then the second factor is that we do have trials within His purpose (that would include all those who are the called, and from there on).

The third factor is also found in these verses—God's response to those who are a part of His purpose, expressing His providence.

Romans 8:32 "He that spared not His own Son, [it goes on to say] but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?"

In my sermon last week, we looked at the assurance that we have from God's word that He will provide all of our needs as we progress towards the Kingdom of God. And the greatest assurance of all being that He has already provided the greatest gift of all in Jesus Christ.

Paul's logical conclusion to that thought in Romans 8:28-32 therefore, is that since God has already done that (besides predestinating, calling, justifying, and fully intending to glorify us) it follows that (since God is faithful) He will surely provide all lesser needs, all along the way, as we are sanctified. What more can He give, that would be so difficult, that He would not want to give so that His creation in us is brought to a successful conclusion?

We know from the record in the Old Testament that Israel had a continuing problem dealing with their fears that He would not provide what they needed! As a result, they murmured; and almost invariably following the murmuring was open rebellion.

Murmuring is a symptom of an underlying spiritual problem consisting of a mixture of pride, ignorance, and unbelief. The pride was evident in that they felt that they deserved more and better. They quickly forgot the fact that they were sinners and slaves who earn nothing but death by their own works. Humility and respect for God were qualities that they were almost devoid of.

Ignorance—because they simply did not know God and lacked experience with Him. They kept judging Him on the basis of their ignorance and inexperience, thus limiting Him in their own minds.

The very thing that they needed in order to remove the lack of experience and really come to know Him, were the trials that God was putting them through. From these trials would come the experiential understanding that God is indeed faithful to His promises. Those trials and their conclusions wouldn't merely be theoretical book knowledge, but practical experience within the relationship.

Unbelief, because they remembered not. Psalm 78 repeats a couple of times that what He had already done in miraculously freeing them from their slavery, parting the sea, giving the manna, and on and on, and the education given them as a result of their early experiences with God, provided a foundation for trusting Him in the wilderness. However, they didn't. The evidence of their self-absorption is shown in their concern only for the immediate.

There are many parallels between our life and that of the Israelites. As we grow in our relationship with God we find ourselves with many fears; self-absorbed, ignorant, immature, without vision, and forgetful too.

There is another psalm, besides Psalm 78, given to help us remember God's providences as we make our way. (Incidentally, this is song number 102 in the hymnal) We will read the first five verses to give us some of the flavor of it.

Psalm 136:1-5, "Oh give thanks unto the Lord; for He is good: for His mercy endures forever. O give thanks unto the God of gods: for His mercy endures forever. O give thanks to the Lord of lords: for His mercy endures forever. To Him who alone does great wonders: for His mercy endures forever. To Him that by wisdom made the heavens: for His mercy endures forever."

You can see the pattern here—the psalmist picked out areas that he understood God should be thanked for. From our point of view what He did is an act of mercy, whether it's to everybody in general or to certain people in particular, matters not. It was still a merciful act.

Psalm 136:11-12 He brought out Israel from among them: for His mercy endures for ever: [bringing Israel out was an act of His grace, it was a mercy] With a strong hand, and a stretched out arm: for His mercy endures for ever.

Psalm 136:23-24 Who remembered us in our low estate: [hang on to that] for His mercy endures for ever. And has redeemed us from our enemies: for His mercy endures forever.

Mercy, in this context, refers to God's loyal love despite Israel's sins. God had more than enough justification to drop the whole thing after He had just a little bit of experience with them out in the wilderness! But His grace is given in spite of what Israel did, because His purpose supercedes the acts of people and He is totally confident in His ability to be able to turn people from what they are, to what He is!

So He just plows on, if we might say that; but He doesn't do it stupidly, idiotically. He does it with purpose and with wisdom—bringing the right pressures to bear at the right time in order to get people to make the choices to change! That would never happen without His steadfast loyalty to what He is doing.

In contrast to us, who are so unstable in our attitudes and our conduct, God mercifully and faithfully remembers and rescues us in our difficulties. That is why I read Psalm 136:23-24. He remembers us.

In verse 24, the word "redeemed" would be better translated 'rescues' us (even when we're fighting against Him).

There is an interesting statement regarding Noah in the midst of one of the most terrifying trials that a human being has ever gone through.

Genesis 8:1 "And God remembered Noah..."

There must have been times when Noah wondered where God had gone; in the midst of the violent devastation that was going on.

It wasn't merely water. There were tremendous earthquakes that were going on! Water was squeezed out from under the surface of the earth—gushing; geysers all over the place, with the combination of earthquakes, mountains rising and falling, and water—maybe with tremendous tidal waves going every which direction!

And there he was—floating around in something just like a barge, a rudderless barge—being tossed to and fro, with all kinds of flotsam and jetsam. Everywhere you

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looked: debris-filled water; huge trees floating all over the place, being thrown up into the air through these big waves, all that tumultuous water.

God hadn't gone anywhere. God was watching over Noah and, it says here, the animals too.

Genesis 8:1 "And God remembered Noah, and every living thing, and all the cattle that was with him in the ark:..."

"Remember" is used here not in any way to intimate that God was in any danger of forgetting, but rather is referring to His special attention to those who are His own sons. His eyes were on Noah, His family, and those animals in the ark—constantly; just like we saw in the sermon this morning.

God was there with Israel constantly! He never went off anywhere. He never let His mind wander. In the daytime, He was before them; in the nighttime, either behind them, over them, or whatever. There was always a witness of how close He was.

That is a witness to you and me. It's no different today. He is there! That's what one of His names is: The God who is there! But it's so easy for us to forget, is it not?

Genesis 9:14-15 "And it shall come to pass, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow shall be seen in the cloud: And I will remember my covenant, which is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the water shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh. And the bow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth."

Interesting, isn't it? The rainbow is not just a memory hook for you and me. Surprisingly, we see here that it is a reminder for God! I don't think that we would ever think of Him forgetting, so that is put there for you and me to take assurance in.

Genesis 19:29 "And it came to pass, when God destroyed the cities of the plain, that God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when He overthrew the cities in which Lot dwelt."

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These last two scriptures especially, are something that Richard referred to this morning. They are anthropomorphisms. It is a way of perceiving God as if He were a man and needed to be reminded. It's something that we can relate to. It is ascribing human qualities to God.

We know He doesn't forget at all! That is put there just in case this slips our mind; to know that God is going to be reminded. He is right there and He is going to be working on our behalf, even when we think that He has gone way off somewhere.

Exodus 2:24-25 "And God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God looked upon the children of Israel, and God had respect unto them."

God doesn't look at time in the same way that we do. We feel that time is running out. We know that we only have so long to live. We know that we want to accomplish some things, because often times we feel that we are in a position for only a short period of time to accomplish something good-for us or some loved one.

God's arm is never shortened. It's never too late for Him. He can resurrect people if He wants too! He is never without a solution. Everything is always under control.

Now there's an interesting contrast. The very first time that the word "remember" appears in *The Bible*, in regards to a man, is in the story regarding Joseph—and it is negative. It occurs when the chief butler's dream had just been interpreted. Joseph said to him, he appealed to him—"remember me, if you get the opportunity." But he remembered not. He forgot. Isn't that typical?

God *always* remembers. Mankind has a sorry record of almost continuous forgetfulness.

Let's go back to the New Testament to the book of Titus. We want to begin to apply this concept to us a bit more directly. This will begin to lay a foundation for how long God has known us.

Titus 1:2 "In hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began:"

That last phrase "before the world began", according to my margin, is more accurately translated 'before time began'.

This might help you because time, remembering, and forgetfulness are kind of related to one another. Over time, we tend to forget because our minds become filled with other things that are going on.

What we're going to show is that God will no more forget us than He forgot those who lived earlier; like we just saw with Noah, as we saw with Abraham, and as we saw with the children of Israel.

"Remembering" indicates thoughts of experiences beforehand. In other words, when we have had experiences with somebody or something at some time in the past, that would be beforehand (as measured from right now); we had thoughts, plans, or experiences. Promises were made and then recalled. That is, the experiences were recalled (or the promises were recalled) later in a time of need.

Gods' memory *of us* goes back a *long, long way!* It says that God (who cannot lie) promised *before time began!*

Romans 8:29-30 "For whom He did foreknow, [remember you have to have experiences beforehand, and then you *know* something which we may or may not forget] He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren. Moreover whom He did predestinate, them He also called: and whom He called, them He also justified: and whom He justified, them He also glorified."

Verse 29, all by itself, uses two terms that indicate prior knowledge of. Those are the words "foreknow" and "predestinated". Both of these words are interesting. First of all, foreknow (or foreknew) indicates a sense of bringing into a special, *intimate* relationship.

How do we know that? It's because of the word 'know' that is preceded by the word 'fore'. 'Fore' indicates something that happened previously. 'Know' indicates something that happened previously. 'Know' indicates intimate knowledge of, or intimate relationships with. I think that you all understand that the word even has sexual intimacy implied within it.

So to foreknow somebody, within this context where He is talking about the future, as it were, indicates bringing somebody into a special, intimate relationship. In other words, it was something that He planned a good while ago.

The word "predestinated" points to the goal; for which He knew (foreknew) those that

He called, those that He justified, and those that He glorified.

Did you ever notice that that word "glorified" is in the past tense? That's how confident God is that He can bring this thing to pass. He writes the glorification in the past tense! He's confident! Are we?

So that word "predestinated" indicates being foreordained to be called, not just glorified. Called, justified, *and* glorified.

Let's begin to nail this down a little more solidly by going back to one of Paul's writings.

Ephesians 1:4 "According as He has chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love."

When this thought is added to those two previous verses, it gives more of a concrete indication of why and how long God's intents for each of us have been held by Him; so there is a strong basis for saying that He remembers and He moves to lift us, each one of us, from our low estate—as slaves to Satan and consigned to death—to His level of experiencing life.

It's no wonder that He says "remembers" because these were thoughts (you were thoughts) in His mind before the foundation of the world. How long He has held that in His mind I have no idea! But He didn't forget! That's why He says He remembers.

Does it seem weird to you that this God who's been thinking about you for all these many years is suddenly going to forget about you after He calls you; after He justifies you? He takes you out into the wilderness so that you can make your journey to the Promised Land and then He just turns His back and forgets all about you? Hardly, brethren. He is thinking about us *all the time!*

I think the next question then has to be one that may cause us more wondering than any other. It is something that I have already intimated. And that is: will He forget the rest of His creative process for us? Will He bring us to any point in the fulfillment of His purpose and then stop providing for its completion?

Brethren, did the manna ever stop falling? Did the cloud and the pillar of fire ever leave them? Not until He got them there! That's as far as the symbolism had to go because those things were lessons, evidences, for you and me! He just had them walking

through that for our sake, so that there would be a record of faithfulness on His part! So when we go into our own wilderness we would have assurance from what He did beforehand; that He's going to continue to supply *for* us! David said:

Psalm 40:1-5 "I waited patiently for the Lord; and He inclined unto me, and heard my cry. He brought me up also out of a horrible pit, out of miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings. And He's put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto our God: many shall see it, and fear, and shall trust in the Lord. Blessed is the man that makes the Lord his trust, and respects not the proud, nor such as turn aside to lies. Many, O Lord my God, are your wonderful works which you have done, and thy thoughts which are to us-ward: they cannot be reckoned up in order unto you: if I would declare and speak of them, they are more than can be numbered."

Every one of us ought to be able to say this right along with David.

Doesn't the Bible give you the impression that David's life was one long battle interspersed with brief periods of peace? Despite all of the trouble his life was filled with, it ended successfully and he is going to be in God's Kingdom.

Psalm 40:2 says (the last phrase): "...He established my goings." My margin says: "He established my steps." What David is referring to here is that by God's calling of him, He turned him (and of course us) away from ultimate destruction and put us on the path to becoming like Him; and being in His Kingdom. By His calling, He gives us the possibility of choosing the narrow way that leads to life.

In verse 3 David makes reference to a new song. He is talking about a new direction in life to go along with establishing his steps. Now he can see life's wonderful purpose (and we can too) and it excites us! That is why it says "song". It made him sing of glory that was going to come.

Verse 4 gets to the crux of our responsibility and that is to grow; to mature in trusting God as we make our way to the same end that God intends.

Then in verse 5, there is great encouragement; reminding us that God is thinking of us virtually all the time! David said, "...if I could declare them and speak of them, they are more than can be numbered"! He surely doesn't forget about us. He knows, as it says in so many places, that we're dust. And He is providing. But so often, we're looking in a different direction than He is, so we don't understand the provision that is there.

There is a practical reality that we must deal with as we make our way, and that is that in the midst of our difficulties, like the Israelites in the wilderness, we frequently forget all of these assurances and we lose sight of Him.

I Corinthians 13:12 "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known."

We don't see the picture all that clearly. That is one of the reasons for the trial. It's to sharpen our vision. It's to sharpen our understanding. To be able to grasp more clearly the reality that He is taking us toward.

Think about this in relation to the Israelites out in the wilderness. It wasn't until they got awfully close to the Promised Land that they could actually see it. Twelve of them went on before and the people didn't really believe their report.

While we're on the way, our vision begins to become a bit more clarified (the closer we get to the end). There is a symbol there as well; that the time is coming when we're going to know a great deal more.

The reality that we have to deal with is: we're not there yet! So we have to expect quite a measure of not being able to see clearly. Life is mystifying.

Job ran into this headlong. Much of the remainder of the sermon is going to be in reference to the experience that he had to go through. In Job 23, he ran headlong into this same dilemma. We find here how he reacted to it:

Job 23:1-17 "Then Job answered and said, Even today is my complaint bitter: my stoke is heavier than my groaning. Oh that I knew where I might find Him! That I might come even to His seat! I would order my cause before Him, and fill my mouth with arguments. I would know the words which He would answer me, and understand what He would say unto me. Will He plead against me with His great power? No; but He would put strength in me. [that is, explanation] There the righteous might dispute with Him; so should I be delivered forever from my judge. Behold, I go forward, but He is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive Him: On the left hand, where He does work, but I cannot behold Him: He hides Himself on the right hand, that I cannot see Him: [ever felt this way?] But He knows the way that I take: when He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold. My foot has held His steps, His way have I kept, and not declined. Neither have I gone back from the

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commandments of His lips; I have esteemed the words of His mouth more than my necessary food. But He is in one mind, and who can turn Him? And what His soul desires, even that He does. For He performs the thing that is appointed for me: and many such things are with Him. Therefore am I troubled at His presence: when I consider, I am afraid of Him. For God makes my heart soft, [or weak] and the Almighty troubles me: Because I was not cut off before the darkness, neither has He covered the darkness from my face."

At the beginning of the chapter Job complains bitterly because he can't figure out what is going on in his life! Why is there so much mystery? Why so much pressure? Why so much sorrow and pain? Does he really deserve this?

By the middle of that chapter he begins to correct himself, realizing that what he said in the beginning was impetuous and without adequate thought.

He goes on to comfort himself somewhat, saying that God knows the path that he walks; but at the same time he (Job) can't see precisely where he's headed. That is what he means when he says, "...I cannot perceive Him...He hides Himself..."

He also took comfort in the fact that he knew that he was seeking God and that he was keeping God's commandments. However, he also felt that God's mind for him was different from what Job perceived, so he was afraid and puzzled.

Overall, the chapter is actually a statement of faith. He obviously didn't fully understand the mystery of why all this had come upon him and he was troubled because, like you and me, he wanted answers.

At the same time, he wasn't about to give up because he knew God well enough to know that he was in good hands! Overall, his view was actually, fairly optimistic.

It was as though a dark and ominous cloud was hanging over him. Despite that, he was willing to look at the bright side—that is God's side, the side that was hidden from normal human sense and reason. In the eyes of faith, Job saw it, even though imperfectly.

Unlike the Israelites in the wilderness, he took the long view rather than the immediate view of his fiery trial. He said in Job 23:10, "...when He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold." What a statement of faith!

Job 34:18 "Is it fit to say to a king, you are wicked? and to princes, you are ungodly? How much less to Him that accepts not the persons of princes [he is referring to God here] nor regards the rich more than the poor? For they are all the work of His hands. In a moment they shall die, and the people shall be troubled at midnight, and pass away: and the mighty shall be taken without hand. For His eyes are upon the ways of man, and He sees all his goings."

Job knew that God was involved in this. He was seeing things differently than his three companions who were there arguing. The things that Job did see are essential for us to understand as we go through these trials with God. Proverbs 15:3 confirms what we just read in Job 34.

Proverbs 15:3 "The eyes of the Lord are in every place, beholding the evil and the good."

God is omniscient! He sees everything that is going on!

The question for you and me as we go through our journey is: how do you feel about His watchfulness over you? Does it make you feel guilty and ashamed because you know that you aren't doing as well as you could?

You start thinking about something like this and you'll understand why Job said the things he did. Does it distress you or does it comfort you to know that God is aware?

There's no darkness to God. There is no other side of the earth in which one can hide himself from God's penetrating gaze. I don't know how He does it, but I believe His word; and He says that He sees it all.

To the sinner this is a terrible thought. He seeks to deny it or forget it, so he doesn't feel so uncomfortable.

But to the Christian it should be a comforting revelation; knowing that God sees all because he knows that God is aware, that strength has already been given, and more is going to come! Doesn't He say in I Corinthians 10:13 that He provides a way to get through these trials?

It's obvious that Job's three friends didn't know the way that Job took—the one that God

established him on—and they grievously misunderstood. They thought Job was a hypocrite. They thought he was a great sinner being punished by God so they kept arguing with him, censoring him, and attempting to get him to change his ways to be like them!

Haven't you had some of these same things happen to you in your relationship with your friends, or maybe in your family? Haven't your dealings with God been misunderstood and misinterpreted?

It should be a consoling thought that God knows what you've experienced and perhaps seemingly lost in the midst of those encounters.

In the narrowest sense, Job didn't fully understand the way either. He too was perplexed by what he was going through. Life sometimes is profoundly mysterious.

Though the power of choice is always with us, we frequently don't know whether we have made the right one. But God is still there, isn't He? Right or wrong, He is still there.

If it is the wrong one, He is there to correct. If it's the right one, He's there to move us on until we make another trial.

God labeled Job, in the very beginning of the book, as blameless. He was saying that overall in life Job was making an awful lot of right choices. Now he wasn't perfect, and this very trial was being used to perfect that which wasn't yet perfect! God was supplying something Job very much needed, but it was very painful for him to go through.

The sermon is beginning to take a turn here.

Job 23:10 "...[Job said,] when He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold."

Proverbs 17:3 "The refining pot is for silver and the furnace for gold: but the Lord tries the heart."

The intent of that scripture is clear.

There is a parallel going on between God trying the heart, and gold and silver being put through a refining process in a furnace encompassed in heat. This is what God also did to Israel in the wilderness. It is what we are going through as well. Moses wrote:

Deuteronomy 8:2 "And you shall remember all the way [all the way; not just part of the way, not just the pleasurable parts, every part—the scary parts, the mystifying parts, the confusing parts] which the Lord your God led you these forty years in the wilderness, [what for?] to humble you, and to prove you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments, or no."

So He allowed us to suffer through hunger and He fed us with manna. God is testing and perfecting what is in our heart—even as He did with Israel and Job.

Like an exam in school, His tests are not always easy. Sometimes we fly through a test; it was a breeze, a piece of cake! But other times, maybe more often, it seems as though God catches us and we're unprepared. Then the test seems a great deal harder.

Brethren, God has to know what is in our heart. There is no room for error on His part because if we are going into the Kingdom of God unprepared, we are going to be miserable for all eternity. We just won't belong there.

It's during these times of testing that we are most likely to doubt God's loving providence; deceived into thinking that He is unconcerned. But nothing could be further from the truth!

The trial is made exceeding more stressful than it otherwise would be because we are either ignorant or completely misunderstand the way that God looks at trials. The way God looks at trials is the way that we must come to look at them.

Psalms 84:11 "For the Lord God is a sun and shield: the Lord will give grace and glory: no good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly."

What do you think is a good thing? Apple pie and ice cream? Win a million dollars at Lotto? Are things that are pleasurable to us the only things that are good?

Brethren, in God's eyes, a trial is a good thing because of what it will produce and He does not withhold them! They are gifts from Him! Do we look upon our trials as gifts? They are brethren! They are gifts from Him. They are aspects of His grace because of what they are going to *produce in your life!*

Back, in thought, to the book of Job. Does the book of Job conclusively show that what Job went through produced good in him? He's going to be in God's Kingdom too. I think I would rank Job as one of the most righteous men who ever lived (my own personal ranking) considering the severity, the intensity of the trial that God put him through. If our trials are indicative of the level of what we can endure, overcome, and grow from, boy I'll tell you, he had the whole kitchen sink thrown at him—all at once! And he was blameless. He was an upright man.

Therefore, if we are being tested, we should adopt that as our approach. God is aware of our *every step*. Whether He has designed this or permitted this to occur, we absolutely must know that, in His judgment, this is a good thing that He has not withheld from us.

Have you been unemployed for a long time even though you have made it a full time job to find a job? And still, you can't find one and you're turned down, let's say, because of the Sabbath or whatever it might be?

Is your employment only sporadic? God can provide a job, but maybe if you're only working sporadically, it might be because you're making the wrong decision about the kind of work that you're doing, and the job will continue to escape until you finally make the right decision about the employment that does become available. I don't know!

What I am saying is that there are causes, there are reasons, that these trials go on and on.

The testing is the answer, at least in part, of the disappointments that we encounter: the crushing of our earthly hopes; the great losses that we feel from time to time. God is testing our temper, our passions, our patience, our faith, our faithfulness. He wants to see where and what our hopes and our heart are set on.

So often we are quick to blame Satan for our troubles. Indeed, he is a cause of some of them. We learn from the book of Job that, in many cases, he is merely a pawn being used by God. The initial motivation for the trial came from the God who is forming and shaping us into His image.

To put this very plainly and bluntly, we have to play the hand that is dealt to us.

It is at times like this that we are most likely to feel He has abandoned us; that He is not going to provide for us.

There's not a shred of evidence in the Bible suggesting any of us have been given the right to sit and do nothing in the midst of our trial. God expects us to *react* by work.

God's children work in the right direction; with the right attitude, with the right understanding, in the right way, with the right energy to accomplish. On the surface (to the casual observer) it might appear to be 'lifting ourselves up and out by our own bootstraps'. What those without the faith cannot see is that God is there.

Paul says something that always has to be part of our thinking:

Ephesians 1:8-12 "Wherein He hath abounded toward us in all wisdom and prudence; [that is, He has given us understanding] Having made known unto us the mystery of His will [we have in our mind the vision of His Kingdom. We know the purpose of life. That's the mystery of His will] according to His good pleasure which He has purposed in Himself: That in the dispensation of the fullness of times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; [this is the purpose of life for you and me now]...In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of Him who works all things after the counsel of His own will. That we should be to the praise of His glory, who first trusted in Christ."

What Paul said here, we must never forget that our life now is according to the will of God!

When we gave up our bondage to Satan, we became enslaved by God. We gave our life to Him. His purpose for us is now the energizing factor in our life; pointing us in the direction that He is headed in and wants us to follow Him in. Our life is according to His will. There is something that is going on in our life that supersedes all other activities.

To what are we giving our priorities? So often it slips from our mind. This is when we tend to forget (and fail to recall), thus making the trials much harder and longer.

Job understood this principle. That is why he said, early in the trial, "the Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord!" Right from the beginning, he saw God's hand in it but he didn't precisely see the details of all that was going on.

And that's the way we are. I think that there is not one of us who does not believe God is involved and that He's established our way; He's put our steps toward the Kingdom of

God. We agree with that purpose, but we still forget.

I want to clarify something. When I say that Job understood, I don't mean he saw it perfectly; just like we don't see it perfectly. We look through a glass darkly. We see things vaguely.

I think that you will agree that by chapter 42 (of the book of Job) he saw things a lot more clearly; things that he did not see at the beginning. He repented and he said,

Job 42:6 "...I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

Israel felt very much (and very often) the way we do. That's when they murmured.

There are indications in God's word that there may be some very difficult times coming. We need to take them into consideration. I think that you do, but we'll just touch on one of them that hits something that is pretty hard. In Revelation 2:10, we have a New Testament example that is perhaps a prophecy of things to come.

Revelation 2:10 "Fear none of these things which you shall suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that you may be tried; and you shall have tribulation ten days: be you faithful unto death, and I will give you a crown of life."

In some ways there is nothing more difficult than to be accused publicly of something that you are innocent of and to be embarrassed and shamed before your friends. It's very easy for one to feel really put upon and begin frantically to justify and defend ourselves. Well, some of that may be coming. Maybe some of it will end in death for some people.

I think all of you are aware that the new Homeland Security Acts are being put into place. Patriot One is one that is already enacted now. There are some things in it that are ominous about what the government can now lawfully do in order to restrain those that they consider to be enemies of the state.

I know we are reading some of this on the internet—how some of those things can be applied to a Christian who is innocent but sure looks suspicious and guilty to those who aren't looking through the eyes of faith at what is going on.

Trial by Fire by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

So the trial comes upon you—innocent and yet accused; thrown into prison and the key seemingly thrown away (maybe by law, already judged guilty) and some of the protections that we formerly had are no longer able to spring us from prison—to free us.

Job was being terribly and unfairly harassed by his three companions—perhaps totally unaware of Satan's place in what happened to him. You know, Job looked beyond the agents that were responsible for his painful circumstance, and so did Jesus! God has given us examples of the way we are to look at those things that are so difficult.

John 18:10-11 "Then Simon Peter having a sword drew it, and smote the high priest's servant, and cut off his right ear. The servant's name was Malchus. Then said Jesus unto Peter, Put your sword into the sheath: the cup which my Father has given me, shall I not drink it?"

It was going to be a shameful and bitter experience. His mind was already willingly set—God was in control of all things—and He would graciously accept that as His lot.

We have Jesus. We have Job. We have Paul. Many others of the 'greats of old' could easily have asked God, "Why did you lay such an intolerable burden upon me?" They, by faith, determined to play the hand that was dealt to them.

I Peter 1:4-7 "To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, that fades not away, reserved in heaven for you, [there's the goal] Who are kept by the power of God through faith [this is what we have to put into action] unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. Wherein you greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, you are in heaviness through manifold temptations: [or testing or trials] That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perishes, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ."

Three things in reference to trials appear in that series of verses. Number one is an all encompassing point. The entire thrust of the Bible reveals trials as *necessary* because God has said it as thus! In other words, it is His will that we go through them, thus making them a necessity.

Number two. Testing of our faith is precious; meaning that it has great value! However, that does not mean that it will have immediate value!

Trial by Fire by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

This ushers in point number three. Trials do not take place in a disconnected vacuum. They have reference to the future. There will be great reward in the Kingdom of God for enduring and growing through them.

You can check I Peter 4:12-13 where He says virtually the same things; the same three thoughts are in those verses as well.

Trials are actually an aspect of God's grace. They are gifts given to perfect our character for whatever it is that He is preparing us for in the Kingdom of God.

One thing is sure and that is: the most wonderful thing in the Kingdom of God is going to be the image of God stamped in each and every one of His children.

As we draw this sermon to a conclusion, there's one more thing that I want us to understand. Frequently when we are going through a difficult trial, one of the dominant thoughts that persists in our mind is that God is punishing us.

Answer this for yourself: was Jesus being punished as He went through His trials? We'll start off right at the top. Somebody that we know was sinless. You see the pattern is there. He wasn't being punished, but He suffered. Hebrews 5:8-9: He learned through the things that He suffered.

Number two. Does it say that Job was being punished as he went through his very difficult trial? It doesn't! He was blameless.

Number three. What about the apostle Paul. Was he being punished in any of his difficulties even though he confessed himself to be a wretched man?

Does it say anywhere in the New Testament that the suffering that they and others went through as a result of God's trials were because He was punishing them? There is a strong tendency in us to think of any suffering, any painful experience, as being punishment.

In fact, punishment of a Christian is only one time declared in the New Testament. That's when the man was disfellowshipped in I Corinthians. It shows up in II Corinthians 2:6 where Paul refers to his dis-fellowshipment as punishment.

We may indeed deserve to be punished, but the Bible does not declare a great majority of the time the suffering inflicted during a trial as punishment from God.

Trial by Fire by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

Hebrews 12:5-11 "And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks unto you as unto children, My Son, despise you not the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when you are rebuked of Him: for whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son He receives. If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is he that the Father chastens not? But if you be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are you bastards, and not sons. Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live? For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but He for our profit, that we might be partakers of His holiness. Now no chastening for the present seems to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterwards it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby."

God uses terms translated into the English "chastisement" and "scourges". By strict definition, both of these words imply some measure of punishment. However, commentators insist that that is not the way that they are used in the New Testament.

'Scourges' is #3146 in *Strong's Concordance*. *Zodhiates Word Study* says it means 'to whip'. That is its strict definition:

Used figuratively of God: meaning to chastise or correct. Divine chastisement, though inclusive of it, is not strictly action taken for sins in particular; rather it entails all and any suffering, which God ordains for His children, which is always designed for their good. God's chastisement of us includes not only His whipping us as it were for specific transgressions (with remedial, not retributive intent) but also the entire range of trials and tribulations which He providentially ordains and which work to mortify sin and nurture growth.

Zodhiates again, this time on 'chastisement,' #3811:

Originally to bring up a child, to educate, used of activity directed toward the moral and spiritual nurture and training of the child, to influence conscience will and action. To instruct, particularly a child of youth.

As you can see, chastisement is milder than scourge.

Now this is not from either Strong's or Zodhiates, but from my previous studies into this word.

This word 'chastisement' encompasses three basic areas of child training. Teaching, that is as in a formal school sit-down classroom. Two: drill, as in a military sense; doing something in a repetitious manner—one, two, three, four; one, two, three, four; that kind of thing. And three: correction (in either of those two areas).

The closest English synonym to the word 'chastisement' is 'discipline'.

Why do the commentators feel that punishment, in the sense of either of these words (regardless of where they might be used) in relation to the child of God, should be understood as negligible? It is because of something that it says in the Bible—Isaiah 53:3-8. This is prophecy of Christ and of His crucifixion.

Isaiah 53:3-8 "He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from Him; He was despised, and we esteemed Him not. Surely [listen to this now] He has born our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid upon Him the iniquity of us all. [the Lord has laid upon HIM the iniquity of us all] He was oppressed, He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth: He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so He opens not His mouth. He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare His generation? For He was cut out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people He was stricken."

Now for lack of time I will not go into any long exposition of this, but the foundation of the understanding regarding punishment is here. He took what we deserve as punishment on Himself!

Therefore the pains that we feel following our acceptance of His sacrifice are not punishment, but a correction in order to produce the mind and character of God.

We saw a tiny portion of this in Zodhiates' defining of the term 'scourge'—when he said its use is not retributive (punishment), but remedial (corrective).

To summarize:

In this sermon, again we saw assurances that God will supply.

There is a supreme purpose being ordered of God in our trials. Trials are part of God establishing our step.

The purpose of trials is to refine His image in us.

Even though there are trials, even though the trials may be mystifying and painful, they are not to be perceived as punishment but correction for the Sons of God. To the world, it is punishment. For the sons of God, it is correction.