

## PUNISHMENT OR CORRECTION?

Sometimes when Christians are going through difficult times they are tormented by the thought that God is punishing them for their sins. For the Christian the word “punishment” is never appropriate. In the Bible “punishment” usually means “eternal punishment.” Unfortunately, a number of translations in Hebrews 12:5-13 wrongly introduce the words “punish” or “punishment.” When God permits suffering to come to one He loves, the appropriate words are “chastisement”, “discipline”, or “training.” These words aren’t negative in intent. God is dealing with us as His sons and daughters in love! When He punishes, His purpose is retributive, or negative. He pays the wrongdoer back for his wickedness. Hebrews 12 is talking about is God’s educative treatment.

Christians aren’t fatalists, like the Muslims. When calamity strikes a Muslim, he says, “Allah is great!” because he believes that Allah sends evil as well as good. Christians aren’t determinists, as though God had predetermined both good and evil in advance. Yet they firmly believe both in God’s providence and in His use of the outward forms of evil actions to bring positive benefits to those whom He loves. It is wise for us not to speak about “bad luck”, because God is in control. We human beings always feel as if we could say that things could have happened otherwise; but that isn’t so from the point of view of God’s government of the world and His providence.

There is much that we cannot explain in God’s ways, in His permission of natural evil, like earthquakes and droughts. We often can’t say, for example, why God permits a young person to die when there seemed to be so much potential to be realised. We shouldn’t over-simplify problems, by saying that it is never God’s will that a person should be diseased, or that if a person has faith, healing must come.

Sometimes God actually begins a period of testing. God tested Abraham, by asking him to give up the dear son of his old age, Isaac (Gn 22:1, 12). Can we imagine Abraham’s three-day inner torment? Could he tell Sarah? He had to cling to God’s first word, that his descendants would be called in Isaac, when he was troubled by God’s second word, to sacrifice Isaac. Of course, God knew in advance that Abraham would pass the test, so there was, from God’s point of view, no need to put Abraham through it. But Abraham didn’t know that until the moment arrived. Similarly, it was God who drew Satan’s attention to His servant Job (Jb 1:8; 2:3).

It is appropriate to say that, whenever believers undergo trials, the devil tries to ruin them through the trials, and God, on the other side, is at work to discipline them and purify their faith. That is clearly the case in the apparent contradiction about David’s attempt to take a census of his people. 1 Chron 21:1 says that Satan incited David to do it; 2 Sam 24:1 says that the Lord incited David in His anger against Israel. Similarly, in Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness, He was led up by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil (Mt 4: 1). When believers have a period of trial it is quite appropriate for them to attribute it to the devil (Lk 13:16; 2 Cor 12:7). Yet they also know that God has not forsaken them in the trial, and does answer His people’s prayers to deliver them from evil.

Therefore Christians should look on evil positively. Although believers groan inwardly at the present futility, the chaos of the frustrated universe has already been overcome. Christian resignation isn’t just being paralysed by sufferings that can’t be explained, being swamped by worry, or passive submission. They should have the unshakeable conviction that all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purpose [R 8:28]. When Christians submissively leave it all to God and His will, they are acting as the loving children of their loving God.

Suffering is a means that the Father uses to teach believers to look more steadfastly at Jesus (Hb 12:2-3). No matter what happened, Pollyanna regularly began with, “I’m glad!” The same should be true when Christians react to evil. This ought to be so even when they suffer although they are in the right and because they are loyal to Christ (1 Pt 3:17; Joh 15:20).

Suffering has the positive purpose of freeing a person from the clutches of sin. The one who has suffered is done with sin (1 Pt 4:1).

Suffering gives Christians the certainty that they are God’s genuine children (Hb 12:7-8).

Christians begin to see suffering as a common experience of their brothers and sisters in the world (1 Pt 5:9). Knowing that others share it helps to make it more bearable.

When believers know that they are sharing in Christ’s sufferings, that is cause for joy (1 Pt 2:21; 4:12-14). Strictly, the pain is not the cause of the joy, but it is the country over which the road to joy passes. With Paul we can say that we “glory in tribulations.”

Suffering makes us see, not always at the time, that, when we are weak, God’s power is the greatest, and that God’s grace is all that we need (2 Cor 12:9).

Suffering makes us patient and experienced (Rm 5:2-5).

There is a sense in which believers are made mature through suffering (Hb 12:7,11 just as Jesus was made mature through suffering (Hb 5:7-8).

Suffering has the positive value of strengthening our hope in God's coming redemption (1 Pt 5:8-11; Rev 6:9-11; 2 Cor 4:16-17). Even calamities that signal that this present world will end one day are the birth pangs of the coming new life. (Mt 24:8).

Suffering and grief in others gives us opportunity to show love and compassion, which can provide credibility to our witness.

Suffering is linked with the glory to come (Ac 14:22). Present sufferings aren't final, but slight and brief, in comparison with the glory to come (Rm 8: 17-25).