

Counting it all joy

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[0:00] So I tread sensitively in this area because I think we know amongst us that there are a few who we'd have to say are definitely going through quite severe trials.

! Some of them are health, some of it's plain old age. But this is an acutely difficult time for some. And I think in our sharing and before we're finished it's quite important we should bear one another up. If we get even a hint of some of the purpose of these trials and what God might be doing in them it's important to pray for those who are particularly as it were under the cosh.

But let me just try and unravel or at least give a couple of pointers. I might be very glad of some comments to see if I haven't made everything clear as I'm sure I won't.

But there is a work of grace going on in each of us. Many of you, even you younger ones, know that when you become a Christian God gives you his spirit.

[1:09] But there are things going on. After he's given you his spirit he's working something in you. Any of the children know what that might be, roughly? What does God do in you during your Christian life?

Yes. Cleaning us. Yes. That's good. He's changing us. We'll read a couple of verses that will give you a bit more clue.

One is in Philippians 1 and verse 6. Paul is praying confident that he who began a good work for you, this is for the Philippians, will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

So if we're Christians, a work has begun in us and God is going to take that good work through to completion. We are involved in some way, but God is doing this work.

And the other very key verse in 1 Corinthians 3, this is verse 18, says, And we all who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory are being transformed, that's another word for change, transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

[2:40] So if you're wondering what this change going on in you is, it started already. It might feel early days for those of you who are young. But God is saying he's pretty determined to transform you, change you, to be like him.

Now does that sound like a sort of one, two, three easy steps, and then you're like God? Well, it isn't, is it?

It's really, we'd like it to be, because actually especially in our Western culture we like things to be very easy, very quick. But there's change going on.

God has initiated change, and he's pretty determined to do it. Now I stand back a minute and I think, I think this agrees with my own experience, if I remember back to the days when I was a young Christian.

But I think when you are very young in the faith, often a little bit like babies growing up, there's a lot of encouragement perhaps God gives. Perhaps, I don't know whether other people would agree, but you sometimes find that your witness to others is more fruitful, your praying seems to be more effective, seems to get more answers.

[3:56] God encourages the younger people. I'd like to read a little bit, Knowing God by Jim Packer, has a little few paragraphs I want to read.

Just see where that is. It's page 279. The truth here is that the God of whom it was said, he tends his flock like a shepherd, he gathers the lambs in his arms, and that's in Isaiah 40, is very gentle with very young Christians, and just as mothers are with very young babies.

Often the start of their Christian career is marked by great emotional joy, striking providences, remarkable answers to prayer, and immediate fruitfulness in their first acts of witness.

Thus God encourages them and establishes them in their life. But as they grow stronger and are able to bear more, he exercises them in a tougher school.

So many of us would like to go back to spiritual primary school, but God says, you're ready for something else.

[5:21] But this brings us to this idea of more severe trials. But never more than we can bear. And I'm thinking many of you will know these things.

This is 1 Corinthians 10 and verse 13. It says, God is faithful and will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.

But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it. And there's no doubt about the truth of that, but I don't suspect I'm the only one who at times has, it really doesn't feel right at all, does it?

Because you definitely do feel tempted frequently, beyond what you can bear. So there is a promise though, a very significant one. You're not going to be tempted, or there will be a way out so that you can endure it.

But also not less, because in Acts 14, it says we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God. That's verse 22 of Acts 14.

[6:32] So, I'm only sketching around this, and it might provide a little discussion before we come to communion. But I offer two questions that might help us think about how we encounter God in the midst of trials.

One is, who is God? Now, we kind of know the pat answer, but for you yourself, when you are praying and walking and thinking, who do you really, who do you really think God is?

What do you bring to mind? And the other one is, who are we? Now, I'll give you the obvious answer, and I think we know it quite well in this church. Who is God?

He is a holy God of passionate wrath. There is no messing about with sin. And all the way through the Old Testament, there's a whole series of, this is what you have to do to be acceptable to him. And then, who are we? I think the right answer is that we're deeply sinful, probably very arrogant, and we deserve an eternal misery.

[7:48] We don't deserve anything good from God. Now, insofar as you wander away from those questions or water them down, when you're in the midst of a trial, I think you, you don't encounter God so much.

So, if God has shifted, and I think for many, for many, God has shifted. This, this sounds a bit old-fashioned that he's so severe and so holy.

Surely, he's just like a fatherly person with high standards. And all of a sudden, some people have watered him down a bit. And then we talk about our own situation and maybe we think, oh, well, if you knew my background and what I grew up with, I'm very much a victim and you think you can excuse this or that.

Now, when you, when you soften what you are and bring down what God is, then when a trial comes, you don't, you don't know what's going on. you are not really engaging with God.

But when arrogant people who know they deserve eternal misery tremble before a holy God of passionate wrath, they discover grace.

[9:06] Because that's where God comes alongside. Up until that point, people are just pretending it seems. And there's a, there's a well-known verse in Jeremiah 17, the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.

Who can understand it? Now, I haven't got too much else. I've got a little bit more I'm going to say at the end. But, I think we, we find it quite hard to believe how, I mean, I suppose if you, if you do sometimes even listen to your own conversation for a day or over the weekend or how you think, you might find that you can think a lot of things about how other people could have done better, weren't quite right.

But I wonder how many times out of a hundred thoughts, I wonder how many times you thought about what you did or said without some parents saying that was wrong, say sorry.

I wonder how many times you thought about the things you did wrong. And I think our hearts, when you think about the comparison and actually probably there were a lot of things we did wrong or didn't do that we should have done.

And actually our heart is very deceitful. Now, the bit, I don't know whether I do have the answer to, but I think sometimes a severe trial, a hardship, which I wouldn't wish or pray for anyone, is often the only way we will listen to God or the only way we'll hear him.

[10:46] And perhaps, and I might need some help if there is a bit of discussion, just a little bit here, but the key sense, and we touched on it earlier, is that we need to have humility.

And it's not at all easy to grasp, but if you are humble, then even when things are all lined up pretty severe and bad, you actually remember, I don't really deserve anything good, so if it's quite hard for me, I've got no right to complain, so I will stay humble and I will believe God is good and I will keep my head.

That is no easy task, but I think there is a, it is a test of our faith or our humility when a severe trial comes.

Now I'm nearly through and then I'm going to, I will allow just a few times, we have got a microphone if anyone wants to chip in and help a bit, but I read a book, not just recently, but a while ago, a book with the title Shattered Dreams, and it actually tracks the story of Ruth and Naomi and most of you will know the story of Naomi who lived a life of tragic loss.

I will remind you of a few key bits. At a time of famine, her and her family entered Moab and very soon in Moab, her husband, Elimelech, died.

[12:22] Her sons, Marlon and Kilion, died. And in the middle of the story, Naomi says, do not call me Naomi, but Mara, which means bitter.

So she faced her pain. She was still hanging on to God, but she faced it. She said, don't call me Naomi, I am bitter. I am full of woe.

And then, during the story, her daughter-in-law, Ruth, finds a kinsman, redeemer, Boaz, and marries, and they have a son. And towards the end of Ruth, it says, then Naomi took the child in her arms and cared for him.

The women there said, Naomi now has a son, and they named him Obed. And he was the father of Jesse, the father of David. But I just want to, and Job is another example of someone who you couldn't quite imagine the harshness of things taken from him.

And he was actually someone who was looking to question God. If only God would show up. I've got so many things I want to ask him. But when God did show up, Job didn't have anything to say.

[13:38] When God was saying, where were you when I created the dolphins and the whatever, the biathons, the... So, I think I've said enough to provoke some thought, but there is, I just want you to grab this idea that often, even if quite, even if most of your life seems to be rooted through quite a struggle, still hanging on to God, you are encountering him and going on with him, even in the midst of pain.

And you are probably being equipped to give something to someone else who's been through similar pain. And God's determined to change you. We might not like it, we might not wish it on one another.

But actually, the person who wrote that book, Shattered Dreams, he said, so how would I pray for my grandchildren now? He said, well, I'd like them to have not too much trouble, really, but I'd like them to have enough trouble that they are driven to trust and to deepen their walk with you.

Now, I will, we have got a microphone if anyone wants to comment. I think there's, initially just, does anyone want to chip in on the subject or say something useful? But otherwise, we will move on and do something else.

Does anyone want to? I have three perspectives that I've just arrived to you, but what you're saying is about a person who's got a certain and a certain and a certain without them.

[15:22] Again, my beer's is possible and I'm very tired. Can anybody, does this help? Yeah, yeah. I'm wondering quite what God, her father, has in mind, what these trials are really about achieving.

You might like to think that the story Jesus told about the younger son, the prodigal. Now, the trials he endured were self-inflated. He demanded his inheritance and he left his father and he could have been successful.

He could have invested wisely in the business and come back with a lovely family, present his father. Father, I've returned my inheritance. Here's my lovely family. Please forgive me. Would the

father have had his son back?

No, I don't think so. However, it didn't happen that way and the son, this is the trial he experienced. He was so impoverished, so hungry, he was sharing food with pigs and he reasoned, maybe if I got but his father, he would consider me as a hired hand.

I'm not worthy to be a son. So he went back to the father and even while he was presenting his case, so to speak, father, having run to meet him, threw his arms around him and said, my son who was dead is now alive.

[16:34] He couldn't wait to have him in his arms. And I'm wondering, we may ask, okay, so we're going to experience various trials. What has God in mind? What has God in mind really?

Is it that he should write a wonderful novel or become another Billy Graham or a wonderful ministry? What's God really after in his children? What's the cross really about?

I think why we should find joy somehow in all this is what God is really after in all his children, each one of us. So all our trials, and we will come this way because as you said, he promised to complete the work that he began in us.

That completed work is us in his arms, alive and loved, alive and loved. And there's much about our lives that will deaden our lives, flatten our spiritual experience.

Maybe this is what trials are about. And we'll look elsewhere like the prodigal. But we will come back to the father and discover perhaps again and again that in his arms we truly have everything.

[17:38] That's our eternity to be in our father's arms forever. We know that without him there is no meaning. That's hell, meaninglessness. So take courage in your trials.

If it's very hard and you feel like giving up as I have very recently, don't because the father's not going to give up on you. And the end he has in mind, his heart for you in all these trials, is that you will be in his arms, alive and loved and there forever.

And you can be sure of that. Thanks to the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. That's what this cross is all about. I'm sorry. That's all right. Thank you. Anyone else want to take the microphone and either?

Steve, Steve will. Just briefly, but of course, I mean, Job is an interesting book and I won't go into it now, but simple thing about Job is that just as you can't have compassion unless there's suffering, you can't have faith unless it's tested.

Because it's not, it doesn't exist. Faith requires you to, you know, not to believe six impossible things before breakfast. That's not what faith is. Faith is saying that, as we've just been thinking, that God is going to bring us through this.

[19:00] And so, in a sense, the trial is necessary to, as James says, to prove that the faith is real. And that's of course what the whole of the book of Job is about in one sense.

I touched on it early on in the one Peter verse. These have come to prove the genuineness of your faith of greater worth than gold, though it perishes refined by fire.

But the purpose is that it may result in glory to God. So, tested faith, seen by the world, is something that gives glory to God.

And that's part of our spreading of his good news. David, over there, I would like to. I might be wrong, but at least suffering with a Christian serves a purpose.

With a non-Christian, I mean, what sort of, I mean, no one's free from suffering in this world. Even the richest man in the world suffers to some degree in some respect.

[20:13] Christ. So, at least suffering with a Christian serves a purpose. With a non-Christian, what purpose does a suffering serve? That's a hard one.

I'm only thinking about what it's saying about the Christians here, but if anyone wants to chip in on, I mean, I suppose with non-Christians, sometimes it'll be God shouting to bring people to their senses to see them, but there may be a number of reasons.

Is there one other? Otherwise, I think we, we should move on. Anything else? Quickly? I suppose the day-by-day reality is that it's not an easy thing to sympathize with and encourage people who are suffering because there are people who suffer a lot more than the rest of us do.

And I suppose the best we can do is point people to the Lord Jesus and say the things you've been saying. But I suppose in the end, it's only the Saviour who understands, doesn't he? Because he has suffered and he's a merciful high priest and able to sympathize with our weaknesses. Jesus and the Jesus and God's God's God's love.

[21:53] I suppose there could be a number of reasons why non-Christians are suffering, but one of them might be to try and wake them in the way that judgment was sometimes used in the Bible to stir people up.

perhaps another opportunity for two or three to pray and then we will take communion and then I think we'll also make sure we'll pray and and and and pray and and and pray