



FEED MY SHEEP

PUBLISHED BY DR. JAMES W. BRUGGEMAN
STONE KINGDOM MINISTRIES
P. O. BOX 5695
ASHEVILLE, NC 28813 U.S.A.

See my blog at www.stonekingdom.org

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Joy when bad things happen

The fruit of joy, part 3

When you find that life is not a bed of roses, remember Who wore the crown of thorns on your behalf! That thought leads to this question: How do you react when bad things happen to you? Throughout life, we are all going to have many occasions when “bad” things happen, whether it is the most trivial of everyday irritations and petty annoyances, or major traumatic events—such as the loss of a loved one, a tragic mishap, loss of a job, etc. In our pursuit of the fruit of joy, how we react to such annoyances or traumas gives a good indication of our growth in the character quality/fruit of Christian joy. Christian joy is not limited to only the good times, but it is the ability to have an inner peace throughout the greatest of trials and tribulations. Because this is so vital to Christian growth, let me refresh our memories by repeating the last sentences from the previous issue.

Two major obstacles to joy are chastenings and trials. Both involve our suffering, but here is the chief difference between the two. Chastening is when God brings suffering in order to discipline us for sin in our lives, to correct our behavior, or to change our attitudes of the heart. Trials, on the other hand, are designed by God in order to grow our faith, not to deal with sin in our lives. Both trials and discipline are painful and both are for our ultimate good. For that reason we have cause to rejoice *through* our trials and chastenings.

In the book of Revelation, the risen Savior was speaking to the church at Laodicea when He told them, and it applies to all believers—

Revelation 3:19 As many as I love, I rebuke

and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent.

Please understand, brothers and sisters, the present topic is joy, and so I do not want to misteach anything so that the result of my teaching is that you finish reading this essay with heavy hearts and drooping heads and negative feelings about your suffering. I know that we all share this in common: that when bad things happen in our life—whether it is you or a loved one who is seriously wounded or terminally ill, or if it is financial problems, marital problems, in-law problems, children or parent problems, work problems—whatever the bad things that are happening in your life—I know that we all have the tendency to think that God is beating us up for sin of one sort or another. And then we beat ourselves up with guilt and self-pity because we screwed up, and we brought it upon ourselves.

It has happened to me on more than one occasion, I can assure you, the most striking example being when my teenaged daughter, Sarah, passed away in 1990. (And again with the loss of my wife, Roxanne in September 2013.) Do you think I did not wonder why God did that? For the sake of anyone new to this ministry, I tell the whole story in the message called *Could You Forgive God? My Personal Testimony on Forgiveness*. I have always made this pair of CDs free for the asking.

Did I lose Sarah and Roxanne because God was chastening me for sin in my life, or was it actually *not* due to sin but sent by the Father as a fiery trial of my faith? Would I become bitter and turn away from God? Or would it strengthen my faith? Did I beat myself up with guilt? What is the purpose for guilt? It is the means by which the Holy Spirit brings awareness of sin

to our consciousness. Then, after we have confessed the sin, there should be no more guilt about it, because that guilt has served its purpose.

When Sarah died and at other times in my life, I allowed self-pity to reign in my soul for a time. By the grace of God, I will never let it reign again. I have come to see that feeling sorry for ourselves is *never* productive, it is never positive, it is never helpful in pulling out of depression or a low spiritual state. I have learned that self-pity is self-ish-ness to an extreme degree. Read the epistles of Paul. Though he recounts on several occasions the many perils and physical beatings and so forth that he underwent, not once do we ever detect self-pity from Paul. Instead, Paul refers to his sufferings as a cause for rejoicing,

And so, because we all suffer pain of various sorts, mental-emotional, physical, I do not want any of us to leave here with self-pity and guilt. If you tend to self-pity, rebuke it, refuse to give it space in your mind. Ask Father for the grace to turn your mind towards Him instead. As for guilt, if you have it, deal with it by confessing the sin, and then ever after, tell that negative side in your mind that it has no place because the sin has been confessed *and* you have accepted Father's forgiveness.

By so doing, we are fulfilling Paul's encouragement to believers in 1 Corinthians 11 where, in the context of preparations for commemorating the Lord's supper, Paul says this:

1 Corinthians 11: 31 For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged.

32 But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world.

Allow me to elucidate that passage. Paul is saying that if we want to avoid chastening, which is discipline and correction from the Lord, then we should correct ourselves. It is a totally logical thing. Think about it in terms of your own family.

If you have a child who has a habit of stealing—even if it is no more serious than taking cookies without mommy's permission, it is going to set up bad patterns for life. Therefore, a parent should want to correct that bad behavior pattern as soon as possible. Therefore, you discipline the child in an appropriate manner in order to teach him or her the ways of right-

eousness. But if the child took it upon himself to judge himself, as Paul encourages, meaning that the child decides on his own to never steal cookies again, then he avoids the chastening and corrective discipline by the parent.

In the letter to the Hebrews, in chapter 12, there is a longer passage dealing with God's corrective discipline. The word "chastening" or "chastisement" appears seven times in this upcoming passage.

Let me set the stage. In chapter 11, the writer of Hebrews has just recounted the "faith hall of fame" heroes. He lists them by name, mentions a thing or two about them, and then concludes by saying that they all died in faith, but they did *not* receive the promises before they died.

It was God's plan that they would not go on to perfection in immortal bodies without us having lived in mortal bodies also and having our opportunity to complete the race simultaneously with them. Then Paul (presumably the author of this epistle) continues:

Hebrews 12:1 Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us,

What does that say? Run with *what*? Run with patience. Why would we need to run with patience? Because it is going to seem like the bad stuff never ends. So it would be helpful if we had the grace of patience, wouldn't it?

I have to make a confession here. Because I just realized that God snookered me. I don't know how He knew it, it was like he could read my mind or something. ☺ But you see, in a half-joking, half-serious manner, I would tell people never to pray for patience because God will be certain to answer your prayer and bring all kinds of trials your way in order to develop patience in you.

And so, years ago as I was initially preparing teachings on the various fruits and as I was going through the list of the fruits of the Spirit for the purpose of deciding which one to do next, I remember that I consciously avoided the topic of patience. I was saying in my mind: No, not yet, Lord. Let that patience thing wait awhile, okay?

And so I said to myself: “Joy! That’s a great one! Who doesn’t want the fruit of joy in their life? That will be a fun topic to teach about; it’s so positive, and blah, blah, blah.” That’s what I mean by “God snookered me.” God hustled me. He came in through the back door. Who would have thought that you can’t teach about joy without getting into chastenings and trials and long-suffering and forbearance and patience and perseverance?

And how has He snookered me even at this present time? What has He done in my life just since the last issue of FMS? Well, He nearly took me out of commission again with severe back and leg pain that was almost as bad as that which kept me in bed for ten weeks in 2010! Father sometimes has this habit of bringing trials and tests into my life concerning the very things I am trying to teach others! The nerve of Him! © In all seriousness, thank you, Father. I stand corrected...and ashamed. (And I am grateful to You that I am standing as opposed to *lying in bed 24/7* for weeks on end!)

As we examine the structure of these two chapters of Hebrews, we find that Paul has just elaborated on the various trials and hardships of the heroes of faith, and then he begins this chapter by talking about us and how we need patience to run our own race, and in this next verse, he gives the example of the Savior and the suffering that he endured, and let us pay particular attention to how he endured it.

2 Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Because Jesus kept His eye on the goal of resurrection—both His and ours—He was enabled to endure the cross.

3 For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.

4 Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin.

So Paul says that when we get the notion that we can’t endure anymore and we become weary and want to give up, then just look to the example of Jesus and what He suffered willingly on our behalf, because He did not deserve one speck of that pain. He did it all for us.

5 And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him:

6 For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.

7 If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?

Of course, our earlier illustration of the child taking cookies is a simple example of this principle. The parents discipline the child, perhaps administering corporal punishment, and we know that it is done out of a motivation of love for the child, not meanness or anger. Similarly, that is how our heavenly Father deals with us.

But do we as parents spank or otherwise punish the children of the couple down the block or in the next state? No. Why not? Because they are not our children. We do not love them in the sense that we love our own. And further, we are not *responsible* for their correction and discipline, are we? Which leads us to verse 8...

8 But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons.

Since we are all sinners, we all suffer chastisement at one time or another. This means that there is never any reason for any of us to judge another in our hearts or ever say anything to anyone else along the lines of “Oh, well, that’s easy to see that brother or sister so-and-so is being chastised for their sin of such -and-such.” We should never allow that tendency to have its way in us.

Number one: How presumptuous on the part of any who would judge like that! Do we ever know all the circumstances? No! This is where the Scripture is applicable which adjures us to “judge not lest ye be judged.”

Secondly, even if our presumption were true, it is the opposite of Christian love to think evil of that person, because in reality what we are thinking is “well, they’re just getting what they deserve.” It smacks of spiritual pride. Let us take heed, lest we also fall.

9 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?

10 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.

By the way, that word, *pleasure*, has nothing to do with pleasure in the sense we think of it today which would give the sense that a father derives some kind of perverse pleasure from administering punishment. The word *pleasure* there actually has to do with discernment and judgment, meaning that the father corrects the child as he judges is appropriate to the offense... “that we might be partakers of his holiness.” Holiness is godliness. Holiness is being set aside for God’s purposes. Holiness is living righteously and pleasing to the Father. We are chastened so that we may grow towards perfection.

11 Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.

The secret of living joyfully while enduring chastening is in remembering the principles outlined in this passage in Hebrews, that God disciplines those whom He loves and that the ultimate result is that we exhibit the peaceable fruit of righteousness. And when we can maintain joy during chastening, then we need not hang our heads and say: Oh, woe is me.” Or put another way:

12 Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees;

13 And make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed.

14 Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord:

When we undergo bad times, it is either chastening or trials of faith. Of course, sometimes it can be both. Let us now discuss the trials, that is, when the bad times are not because it is a corrective judgment, but it is sent by God to test and grow our faith. As with chastenings, so too, these trials can be obstacles to joy in our life.

Trials can come in a plethora of forms. The very same things mentioned earlier as means of chastening

could also be Father’s means of testing our faith as well. So whether it is you or a loved one who is seriously injured or terminally ill, or if it’s financial problems, marital problems, in-law problems, children or parent problems, work problems—or if it is rejection or criticisms or even serious persecution, the trials of our faith can take practically any form. How can we tell the difference between trial and a chastening?

My suggestion would be to take a guilt-check? Is something gnawing away in our conscience,... like a rat gnawing on a piece of wood? Perhaps it’s time to deal with it. If guilt check comes up clean, then we can be fairly certain it is Father blessing us with an opportunity to grow our faith up another notch. He is sending us a trial as an opportunity to build our character in one or more areas.

If you have been a practicing Christian for any length of time, then you can agree with me from your own experiences that your faith can *only* grow and your character can *only* be built by means of trials and testing. We can learn about faith by reading Christian books and the stories of great Christian men and women. We might even have the benefit of seeing the good examples of great faith among people around us, but we only make real spiritual progress when we ourselves undergo trials and testings, don’t you agree?

One of the worst disservices that an evangelist or any Christian can do is to give the impression to an unbeliever that once they become a Christian, that life will be smooth sailing from there on in. Nothing could be further from the truth. Life will be one trial after another. But do you know what? It will be one trial after another whether you are a Christian or not. The difference is that when you are a Christian you begin to understand the purpose of suffering and thereby we are, or should be, better able to endure life’s hardships. (To be continued.)

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