

Praising God For Our Adversities

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[Winnebago Lutheran Teacher's Conference, Oshkosh, Wisconsin, Feb. 12, 1982]

How many of the psalms do you know? The Messianic... funeral... penitential... Good Shepherd...? Even though the Psalms are the hymn book and devotional book of the Church, a whole body of psalms remains untouched and unused by most of us, especially the psalms of David in which he talks of his enemies, of continually going to God and crying for deliverance from them, of rejoicing in their defeat, and of praise to God for holding him up in the midst of adversity.

As we study the matter of our adversities, we hope to see why it is that we may not be tuned in to these psalms, or to the message of many prophets, or to Paul's amazing rejoicing and praise of God in the midst of his many trials.

I think there is a problem in our personal devotional life that is related to the theme of this paper—our adversities and our praise of God for them. We are not fully aware of our adversities and therefore, we are not aware of God in the way expressed in the psalms and hymns of the Scriptures. If we don't properly understand our adversities, we lack the understanding that grabs us and sets us on our knees before Him, seeking His help and praising Him as we face our adversities.

(A note on the term "adversity": we could substitute for it, "evil as it affects us," or affliction, or the troubles and problems of life, or the effects of sin, or tribulations and trials; our adversities are all the hindrances and obstacles, the problems and needs, and reverses that come to us in this life as we like pilgrims make our way through this vale of tears.)

I.

What are some of the adversities for which we should be praising God? We can list some of the adversities to which the Bible points:

- 1) Storms and adverse weather, shipwrecks and other "natural" calamities.
- 2) Invasions and wars, economic troubles within the land; loss or theft of money and goods, or good name and reputation; property wearing out; violence and its varieties (crime, vandalism, unsafe streets).
- 3) The corrupted relationship between people, between spouses, neighbors, parent and child.
- 4) Friends that desert and forsake us; suffering injustice at the hands of others; being made an object of scorn or mockery.
- 5) Sickness of all kinds, from cases needing surgery to eye troubles corrected by glasses, congenital and developed; blindness, deafness.
- 6) Old age and its infirmities, or untimely death.
- 7) The terrors of death and of the end.
- 8) Reacting to the problems of those around us, to their sickness and problems; feeling the burden of those who need our care and help.
- 9) Inner problems and needs, both psychological and religious, as in Luther's *Anfechtungen*:
 - uncertainty over decisions to make, fears and worries and anxieties.
 - feeling unfruitful and unproductive, that God is not blessing our efforts
 - weak faith and the fear of losing one's faith; the doubting faith that wonders: "Does God love ME?"
 - temptations as Satan attempts to lead us astray.

After this reminder of the scope and presence of our adversities, we see them as the effects of our own sin, as the effects of the sins of others, and as the effects of the general fallen state of the world since Adam and Eve first led our race from holiness and righteousness. We could therefore sum up: our adversities are our sinful world in which we live and to which we contribute our own measure of sin.

But let's apply these adversities more directly to you, teachers in our Christian schools in the 1980s. Consider first, the whole *economic world* in which we live. There is the lazy workman at GM, and the resulting "defect" on our car, the hassles and time invested in seeking repair, and the problem still continuing. We are affected by inflation and the shrinking paycheck, the price of wheat and the baker's charge for a loaf of bread, by oil cartels and grain deals, by the inefficiency of government and the post office and on and on. And especially in this area—the affliction of reading teacher salaries in the public schools. And then there are those congregation members who live much better than you do, and then wonder why you don't join in their way of life.

We turn next to our adversities in *interpersonal relationships*. Not being able to communicate with others, or having words come different than we had intended, or being misunderstood in word and actions. Separation from families and friends, and the loneliness that comes. People who don't understand dedication to Christian teaching, and even those who try to entice away to something "better."

Parents not helping their children with school work, parents and members not understanding what the Christian school is attempting, parents attacking you because their children are not learning enough or as readily as they consider possible. Permissive parents upset at your discipline, and the disruptiveness of the children you are teaching. Troubles with the pastor and with other teachers, personality conflicts. Being looked down on by the congregation, or even ignored. Marriage difficulties, parent difficulties, wanting to be married and having no prospects.

And then there are afflictions in your *inner life*: awareness of your own failings and weaknesses, and not seeming able to do anything about them; and inability to give up bad habits and bad ways, or to even take them seriously. Temptations to despair and to give up, to get out of teaching and into something easier (anything else, everything else has to be easier than teaching!). Regrets over lost time, over lost opportunities, lost years. Our inability to really get moving and accomplish the work. Envy of a colleague's abilities. Discovering personal limitations, in gifts and zeal, in courage and vision, in ambition, dedication. All temptations to sin, weaknesses of faith, reliance on self.

And consider also the afflictions in our *physical life*: the stress and strain of teaching, working when you are tired and played out, health problems.

But not only must a teacher deal with personal adversities; he must also react to the adversities of his pupils. The pupils' adversities affect both classroom work and their life as a Christian. Among the prevailing adversities faced by some students are:

- Divorced parents, alcoholism at home, family quarrels and troubles;
- The bad example of parents; their lack of concern for the child's education or spiritual life;
- Bullies at school;
- Feelings of incompetency or inadequacy; difficulties in keeping up with the other children;
- Physical handicaps and being different: fat, thin, taller, reaching puberty earlier or later;
- Being dressed in "different" clothes by parents.

In listing adversities for ourselves and for our pupils, we can go on endlessly for each day of each of our lives. But as we were reminded of some of our adversities, we began to see that each of us does indeed have them in abundant measure, that our adversities do indeed press us sore, and that we are not praising God for many of them at all.

II.

Now we are not to be praising God that there are such evils and adversities (“Oh God, I’m glad I’m sick: Praise the Lord, I’m broke!”), for God does not cause them, being neither the author of them nor the one responsible for their continuing existence. As the Augsburg Confession reminds us: “the cause of sin” (which produces adversities) “is the will of the wicked, that is, of the devil and ungodly men.” But still we are to be praising God not only while we are confronting the adversities, but also praising God for the presence of adversities in our lives.

We should not retreat into the kind of thinking that separates adversity from God. One could see adversities as “natural events” and not as indications of the finger of God in our lives. One could ask the weatherman to explain bad weather and ruined crops. Psychological stresses can be explained as a phase in growing up. Historical events can be described in terms of cause and effect. Headaches can be dealt with by taking aspirin. Inflation can be understood by reading Time magazine. But in such thinking, in which the aspects of life are made into features of the heredity and the environment, we miss precisely the point that turned Job and David and Paul to God in their adversities. In their adversity they saw the finger of God, and so they turned to God for relief and for answers. Our age neither sees God in adversity, nor does it turn to God in adversity. Much less does it praise and worship Him in adversity.

In considering the adversities in our life, we must also see that although adversity is not caused by God, adversity in our life is permitted by God. God permits the adversity in our life and does not stop it—or does stop it—as He wills. Though God does not *will* that there be adversity, yet He *permits* adversity. As Satan was allowed by God to work adversity in the life of Job (as we see in the memorable passage in Job 1 and 2), so Satan is allowed by God to work adversity in the life of each of us, and the sin we commit is allowed to bear its evil fruits, and the sins of others are allowed to sting our lives. As God sees best in His plan which is higher and deeper than our thoughts, so He carries out in our life. Hear God speak:

“I make peace and create evil, I the Lord to these things.” – Isaiah 45:7

“Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it?” – Amos 3:6

“And the Lord said to him, ‘Who hath made man’s mouth? Or who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing or the blind? Have not I, the Lord?’” – Exodus 4:11

“I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; neither is there any that can deliver out of my hand.” – Deuteronomy 32:39

“The Lord killeth and maketh alive; He bringeth down to the grave and bringeth up. The Lord maketh poor and maketh rich; He bringeth low and lifteth up.” – I Samuel 2:6-7

In various accounts of Scripture God says He sent famine, revolution, changes of government, lack of rain, sickness, rising prices and inflation, the troubles of Job, the bondage of Israel in Egypt, the turmoil of the period of the Judges, and the execution of His Son.

All of these things are adversities—evil afoot among us; they are evils; they are not of God in their source and origin and cause. And yet God says: “They are of Me. I am God, and all happens as I want it to happen. Even sin is under My control. Even Satan is under My control. I set the forty years in the wilderness ‘until the carcasses rot’; I set the seventy years of captivity in Babylon; I set the four hundred years in Egypt.” And whatever afflictions are present in your life, whatever their intensity, however long they may last, whatever their nature, they are present in your life by the purpose and design of God. All that is in your life, good and adversity, is exactly as He has sent. You have exactly the life that God has established for you to have. When a Christian senses that, he will be driven to God, not only for answers, but for comfort and for strength to endure, and to praising God for the adversities He has permitted to come into his life, for each and every one of them.

III.

To ask the exact WHY for the presence of this or that affliction in our life will get us nowhere, both because answers like that are beyond us and must await our body's glorification in heaven and release from sinful flesh and mind, but also because there is such a multitude of possibilities of what God might be intending to accomplish through any given adversity. In preparing for this paper I accumulated a partial listing of Biblical answers to the question, "Why?" The list of passage locations alone covered several pages. In addition every Bible story, such as the Joseph narrative, furnishes answers through example of the possible reasons for a given adversity.

But let us still attempt a partial listing of Scriptural reasons for adversity in our lives. This list does give us an assurance that God is indeed at work—at His ever good work—in our troubles and afflictions.

Man lives in a sinful world and can hardly expect a total relief from affliction, since it is part of life here; "Man that is born of woman is of a few days and full of trouble" (Job 14:1). "His flesh upon him shall have pain and his soul within him shall mourn" (Job 14:22). The Christian also has the "cross" in his life, the added affliction of being Christ's in a world that does not love Christ. "Because ye are not of this world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you... But all these things (persecutions) will they do unto you for my name's sake" (John 15:20-21). Paul is equally clear: "All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution" (II Timothy 3:12). In addition to the adversities inflicted by the human condition and by others, we also face the consequences of our own sinfulness. "Why should any living mortal, or any man, offer complaint in view of his sins?" (Lamentations 3:39, NASV). "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed" (Lamentations 3:22)—for sinners deserve no relief.

But for the Christian, God does lighten the burden of affliction; it is a "light affliction which is but for a moment" (Romans 4:17). Rather than dealing justly with our rebellion, "He hath not dealt with us after our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities" (Psalm 103:10). Indeed He is tempering with mercy the adversities that do come to us: "But He, being full of compassion, forgave their iniquity, and destroyed them not; yea, many a time turned He His anger away, and did not stir up all His wrath" (Psalm 78:38, also 106:43-46). Nor does He ever willingly afflict (Lamentations 3:33) His children; He allows adversity only as it accomplishes His purposes.

The forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ removes the sting of adversity, changing the adversity from the act of God in His holy wrath to the act of God in His merciful love. For God accomplishes good through the adversities we bear. The "tribulation brings us to the kingdom" (II Thessalonians 1:5), keeping us on the road to God and turning our feet from the path to hell. (Psalm 94:12) Adversities lead us to turn from sin to God (Job 36:8-12, 5:17-18; II Samuel 12: 14; Psalm 89:30-32; Isaiah 57:17; Acts 13:10-11). For as troubles mount, people ask "where is God" and then seek Him out. Under the heavy hand of adversity, pride and self-sufficiency disappear; men "humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways..." (II Chronicles 7:14). For example, adversity may lead us to reflect upon the sins of our youth and turn from them (Jeremiah 31:19). Again, adversity may open our ears (Job 36:10) and eyes and heart to God again. This kind of working of God in affliction is summed up in Psalm 119:67: "Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I keep Thy word."

Adversities are also able to work Christian virtues in us; they can serve us in our sanctification by bringing us to:

Steadfastness and patience – James 1:2-3

Humility and willingness to obey God – Deuteronomy 12:8-9, I Peter 5:7

A giving up of the filth and shame in our lives – Isaiah 4:4, Romans 6:6, I Peter 4:1

A steadfast hope, after experiences that test and prove us – Romans 5:3-4

A strengthened faith, after it is forced into serious use – I Peter 1:6-7

A compassionate heart that pities and aids others in adversity, especially after our personal experience with that adversity – Job 6:14, 22:29 and II Corinthians 1:4

A life in which we cease afflicting others; those who suffer learn not to make others suffer – Matthew

25, Luke 10, Isaiah 58

Eyes fixed upon that which is real and eternal rather than on the transient and perishing – II Corinthians 4:16-18

A closer union with Jesus (*unio mystica*) as we share His cross and His suffering, His living and His Dying – II Corinthians 4:11ff.

God's "mysterious ways" often bear happy fruit in the believer's life.

But above all, adversity drives us to God and to His waiting arms of comfort, "in my distress I called upon the Lord, and cried unto my God" (Psalm 18:6). Whole psalms, especially those of David (e.g. Psalms 107, 88, 31, 69), are such cries for help unto the Lord, a cry we are to be raising in our adversity, as we use even the very words of the psalms.

Every adversity we face is an indication of God's love for us. One writer commented: "To ask God to be content with us as we are is to ask Him to cease loving us" To ask God to stop His work in our lives, a work also carried out through adversity, is to ask Him to stop changing us from what we are to what we should be. Our adversities are tokens that God is not silent to us, but is in our lives, is involved with our true needs. "Happy is the man whom God correcteth" (Job 5:17), for is not God working mightily in his life? Passages indicate that adversities are the discipline of a loving father to improve and bless his children: "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten." (Revelation 3:17); cf. also Hebrews 12:6-7, I Corinthians 11:32, Proverbs 3:12, Psalm 119:75, Deuteronomy 8:5)

Because God is good, all He does and accomplishes in His children is good. "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God" (Romans 8:28) and "God meant it for good" (Genesis 50:20). The result of God's work in our lives, as Jesus spoke of the man born blind (John 9:3) and of the death of Lazarus (John 11:4), is that God is glorified, His kingdom comes and prospers, and we are blessed. "This is for the glory of God"—herein lies our reason for joy and for praising God in our adversities.

We can sum up the purpose of affliction in our life in this way: Adversity turns us away from wickedness to God; as we come to God with prayers and psalms and receive His help and relief, acknowledging Him to be God indeed, our faith is strengthened and our Christian character is developed and we are molded into the image of God. If adversity drove even wicked Pharaoh and proud Nebuchadnezzar to recognize their wrongdoing and acknowledge God, how much more should the child of God turn to Him in adversity with the heart of thankfulness and praise? God is acting in our lives for that which is eternally good for us.

IV.

The ability to praise God in our adversities is directly related to our trust in Him. Adversity calls upon us to believe in the goodness of God, a goodness of God that in the midst of adversity seems impossible to find. It is faith alone that can say: "What I see seems all wrong, but what I believe makes it all right." But this is no blind trust we have in God; along with Job we first say "the Lord gave" before we say "the Lord taketh away." We have experienced good at God's hand, and we know the faithfulness of God from the cross and the resurrection. "If He spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" (Romans 8:32).

God not only tells us to bear up cheerfully and joyfully under affliction, He gives us the resources to do so. He gives the faith and strength that bring us to the point of understanding the place of adversity in our life, that we may continue to trust Him and praise Him in spite of appearances. He sends His Comforter, that our hearts may not be troubled (John 14) even when our bodies or minds or souls are troubled. He gives us the help of other people to encourage us and to pray for us (James 5:13). He hears our cries for help and oft-times delivers us from our adversities. He assures us throughout the whole of the Gospel record that He is a God faithful to us. He assures us that He loves us with an eternal love and that nothing can separate us from Him (Romans 8:35ff).

Certainly, we who have experienced the gifts of God in and through adversity will be able to help others in their adversities. We are especially called upon in our ministry to teach the children under our care the nature and purpose of adversity in their lives. As we learn to praise God in our adversities, so also we should lead others to a like praise of God for their adversities.

V.

We can do no better than to imitate the Apostle Paul in his praise to God in his adversity. In his three prison epistles, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians, we see a Paul joyous and rejoicing in the Lord, even in the midst of affliction. Paul is in prison, a primitive Roman prison, awaiting the possibility of execution for that which was no crime. Many former friends and colleagues have deserted him. His goal of reaching new lands (like Spain) for Christ has been pushed off, if it will ever come. He could not be present to help the many struggling and dissension-filled congregations he had founded. He realized that *if* he had not gone to Jerusalem, *if* he had not appealed to Rome, he would be a free man. Yet in the midst of adversity of body and soul and spirit, he still thanks and praises God, marveling at God's continuing grace to him. Our adversities may not be as extreme, but from Paul we can certainly learn how to act in adversity.

We don't find him crying to get out of the situation. Rather he makes the most of it and sees his imprisonment as an opportunity to work in ways he may not have been able to work apart from this circumstance of imprisonment. "Doors are being opened" (Colossians 4:3) to the Gospel; the palace guard is being reached with his preaching; the Roman jailers see his faith and are reacting favorably to his message (Philippians 1:12-14). Others are being heartened by Paul's example and preach Christ all the more boldly (Philippians 1:14). Paul had opportunity to preach to judges and princes during the trials and examinations (Acts 24ff.). So as a result, in one way or another, "Christ is being preached, and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice" (Philippians 1:18). The ambassador in chains is still an ambassador. "I suffer hardship, even imprisonment as a criminal, but the Word of God is not imprisoned" (II Timothy 2:9). Paul accordingly asks the Ephesians "not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory" (3:13). The thought in this verse is that God is working good, good for me, good for you, good for the Gentiles, good for the kingdom, good for the Church's glory, good for the glory of God—even in the midst of adversity. Why is Paul rejoicing in the midst of the "slings and arrows of outraged fortune"? Paul is expendable; he is being poured out as "a drink offering" (Philippians 2:17). But still God is advancing His cause, and He is blessing Paul by using Paul to carry out His purposes. He assures Paul of the far greater weight of eternal glory that will be his than are any of his chains or afflictions. God's goodwill is being done—is not that cause for rejoicing and cause for a praising of God? Paul lives in God's grace and has his salvation—is not that cause for rejoicing and for praising of God?

VI.

This is no Pollyanna trust that somehow, somewhere there is good in the worst of troubles. This is knowing with the certainty of Christ dead and Christ alive that the Lord God is our good God and His ways are good. Our life is in His hands and in adversity He is giving us what is needed, what benefits our souls and His kingdom, what tempers us and tries us like ore into gold. Adversity can be seen as a special kind of opportunity:

When trouble knocks at the door of your life, ask not, "Lord, what are you doing *to* me?" but "Lord, what are you doing *for* me?" Ask not, "How *quickly* can I get out of this?" but "How *much* can I get out of this." Ask not, "*How* can I get out of all this trouble?" but "*What* can I get out of it?"

Now look back at your past adversities, at what was really there for you that you perhaps missed. Perhaps we were not perceptive of the hand of God in our adversity and did not go to Him with knees bent and

with hands folded and with hearts praying, and so we could not rejoice in His dealings with us. Perhaps, even now, rather than praising God for the past adversity, you are saying: “Good God, I hope I never have to go through that again”... through that troubled time in life, through the first year of teaching, through the one-room school with all eight grades, through the terrible class, the pain of the operation, the death in the family, financial difficulties, the first months of parenthood. Even now we may not be looking back and seeing how God did mold us and mature us and strengthen us and equip us through these experiences, so that we might be more fit and more able servants of His Word. We may not yet be seeing that in all these experiences of the past, God did continue to use us and our ministry for His eternal purposes of bringing salvation to many.

There is much repentance we should pursue if we are to learn the lessons and reap the blessings of our adversities. We need to mature in our understanding and acceptance of the ways of God with us. We need to grow in faith that in present and future adversities we may be able to joyfully praise God in them.

For He hath not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is His mercy towards them that fear Him. Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him. (Psalm 103:10,11,13)

And whom the Lord does so pity and love, He does at times chasten. As we feel those afflictions, let us rejoice in the Father who is there—for us!

A suggested reading:

Where is God When It Hurts? Philip Yancey, Zondervan (NPH catalog)