

For the Troubled

by C.H. Spurgeon

C.H. Spurgeon's sermon offers hope and guidance for believers facing trials, emphasizing faith, prayer, and the understanding of God's loving discipline.

Scripture: Psalm 88:1, Romans 8:33

Topics: "Suffering", "God's Love and Discipline"

Description

C.H. Spurgeon emphasizes the shepherd's duty to care for the troubled and sick among the flock, reminding believers that adversity is a common experience, even for the faithful. He highlights that true Christians may face unique sorrows, yet they can still cling to God in their darkest moments, as seen in the psalms of lament. Spurgeon reassures that while believers may feel God's wrath, it is not punitive but rather a loving discipline meant for their growth. He encourages the afflicted to recognize that their trials can deepen their faith and understanding of God's love, ultimately leading to greater usefulness in ministering to others. The sermon concludes with a call to be thankful for troubles, as they prepare believers for eternal glory.

Transcript

IT IS THE business of a shepherd not only to look after the happy ones among the sheep, but to seek after the sick of the flock and to lay himself out right earnestly for their comfort and succor. I feel, therefore, that I do rightly when I make it my special business to speak to such as are in trouble. Those of you who are happy and rejoicing in God, full of faith and assurance, can very well spare a discourse for your weaker brethren; you even can be glad and thankful to go without your portion in order that those who are depressed in spirit may receive a double measure of the wine of consolation.

It is clear to all those who read the narratives of Scripture, or are acquainted with good men, that the best of God's servants may be brought into the very lowest estate. There is no promise of present prosperity appointed to true religion, so as to exclude adversity from believers' lives. As men, the people of God share the common lot of men, and what is that but trouble? Yea, there are some sorrows which are peculiar to Christians, some extra griefs of which they partake because they are believers, though these are something more than balanced by those peculiar and bitter troubles, which belong to the ungodly and are engendered by their transgressions, from which the Christian is delivered.

From the passage which is open before us, we learn that sons of God may be brought so low as to write and sing psalms which are sorrowful throughout and have no fitting accompaniment but sighs and groans.

They do not often do so; their songs are generally like those of David, which, if they begin in the dust, mount into the clear heavens before long; but sometimes, I say, saints are forced to sing such dolorous ditties, that from beginning to end there is not one note of joy. Yet, even in their dreariest winter night, the saints have an aurora in their sky; and in this eighty-eighth Psalm, the dreariest of all psalms, there is a faint gleam in the first verse, like a star-ray falling upon its threshold--"O Jehovah, God of my salvation." Heman retained his hold upon his God. It is not all darkness in a heart which can cry, "My God"; and the child of God, however low he may sink, still keeps hold upon his God. "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him," is the resolution of his soul. Jehovah smites me, but He is my God. Even when He leaves me, I will cry, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1), as did our Lord on the Cross of Calvary.

Moreover, the believer in his worst time still continues to pray, and prays, perhaps the more vigorously because of his sorrows. This psalm is full of prayer; it is as much sweetened with supplication as it is salted with sorrow. It weeps like Niobe, but it is on bended knees and from uplifted eyes. Now, while a man can pray, he is never far from light; he is at the window, though, perhaps, as yet the curtains are not drawn aside. The man who can pray has the clue in his hand by which to escape from the labyrinth of affliction. A man must have true and eternal life within him while he can continue still to pray; and while there is such life, there is assured hope.

Exposition of the Text

I will endeavor, in a few observations, to expound the text.

Its strong language suggests the remark that tried saints are very prone to overrate their afflictions. I believe we all err in that direction, and we are far too apt to say, "I am the man that hath seen affliction." The inspired man of God, who wrote our text, was touched with this common infirmity, for he overstates his case. Read his words: "Thy wrath lieth hard upon me." I have no doubt but that Heman meant wrath in its worst sense. He believed that God was really angry with him, and wrathful with him, even as He is with the ungodly; but that was not true. As we shall have to show by-and-by, there is a very grave difference between the anger of God with His children and the anger of God with His enemies; and we do not think Heman sufficiently discerned that difference, even as we are afraid that many of God's children even now forget it, and, therefore, fear that the Lord is punishing them according to strict justice, and smiting them as though He were their executioner. Ah, if poor bewildered believers could only see it, they would learn that the very thing which they call wrath is only love, in its own wise manner, seeking their highest good. Besides, the Psalmist saith, "Thy wrath lieth hard upon me." Ah, if Heman had known what it was to have God's wrath lie hard on him, he would have withdrawn that word, for all the wrath that any man ever feels in this life is but as a laying on of God's little finger.

All God's waves have broken over no man, save only the Son of Man. There are still some troubles which we have been spared, some woes to us unknown. Have we suffered all the diseases which flesh is heir to? Are there not modes of pain from which our bodies have escaped? Are there not also some mental pangs which have not wrung our spirit? And what if we seem to have traversed the entire circle of bodily and mental misery, yet in our homes, households, or friendships we have surely some comfort left, and, therefore, from some rough billow we are screened. All God's waves had not gone over thee, O Heman; the woes of Job and Jeremiah were not thine. Among the living, none can literally know what all God's waves would be. They know, who are condemned to feel the blasts of his indignation; they know in the land of darkness and of everlasting hurricane; they know what all God's waves and billows are; but we

know not. The metaphor is good and admirable, and correct enough poetically, but as a statement of fact, it is strained. We are all apt to aggravate our grief. I say this here as a general fact, which you who are happy can bear to be told; but I would not vex the sick man with it, while he is enduring the weight of his affliction. If he can calmly accept the suggestion of his own accord, it may do him good, but it would be cruel to throw it at him. True as it is, I should not like to whisper it in any sufferer's ear, because it would not console, but it would grieve him.

I have often marvelled at the strange comfort persons offer you when they say, "Ah, there are others who suffer more than you do." Am I a demon then? Am I expected to rejoice at the news of other people's miseries? Far otherwise, I am pained to think there should be sharper smarts than mine; my sympathy increases my own woe. I can conceive of a fiend in torment finding solace in the belief that others are tortured with yet a fiercer flame, but surely such diabolical comfort should not be offered to Christian people. There is, however, a form of comfort akin to it, but of far more legitimate origin; a consolation honorable and divine. There was One upon whom God's wrath pressed very sorely; One who was in truth afflicted with all God's waves, and that One is our brother, a man like ourselves, the dearest lover of our souls; and because He has known and suffered all this, He can enter into sympathy with us this morning, whatever tribulation may beat upon us. His passion is all over now, but not His compassion. He has borne the indignation of God, and turned it all away from us; the waves have lost their fury, and spent their force on Him, our Comforter! As we think of Him, the Crucified, our souls may not only derive consolation from His sympathy and powerful succor, but we may learn to look upon our trials with a calmer eye and judge them more according to the true standard. In the presence of Christ's cross, our own crosses are less colossal. Our thorns in the flesh are as nothing when laid side by side with the nails and spear.

Let us remark that saints do well to trace all their trials to their God. Heman did so in the text: "Thy wrath lieth hard upon me, thou hast afflicted me with all thy waves." He traces all his adversity to the Lord his God. It is God's wrath; they are God's waves that afflict him, and God makes them afflict him. Child of God, never forget this; all that you are suffering of any sort or kind, comes to you from the divine hand. Truly, you say, "My affliction arises from wicked men," yet remember that there is a predestination which, without soiling the fingers of the Infinitely Holy, nevertheless rules the motions of evil men as well as of holy angels. It would be a dreary thing for us, if there were no appointments of God's providence which concerned the ungodly; then the great mass of mankind would be entirely left to chance, and the godly might be crushed by them without hope. The Lord, without interfering with the freedom of their wills, rules and overrules, so that the ungodly are as a rod in His hand, with which He wisely scourges His children.

Perhaps you will say that your trials have arisen not from the sins of others, but from your own sin. Even then, I would have you penitently trace them still to God. What if the trouble springs out of sin, yet it is God that has appointed the sorrow to follow the transgression, to act as a remedial agency for your spirit. Look not at the second cause, or, looking at it with deep regret, turn your eye chiefly to your heavenly Father and "hear ye the rod and who hath appointed it" (Micah 6:9). The Lord sends upon us the evil as well as the good of this mortal life; His is the sun that cheers and the frost that chills; His the deep calm and His the fierce tornado. To dwell on second causes is frequently frivolous, a sort of solemn trifling. Men say of each affliction, "It might have been prevented if so and so had occurred." Perhaps if another physician had been called in, the dear child's life had still been spared; possibly if I had moved in such a direction in business I might not have been a loser. Who is to judge of what might have been?

In endless conjectures we are lost, and, cruel to ourselves, we gather material for unnecessary griefs. Matters happened not so; then why conjecture what would have been had things been different? It is folly.

You did your best, and it did not answer: why rebel? To fix the eye upon the second cause will irritate the mind. We grow indignant with the more immediate agent of our grief, and so fail to submit ourselves to God. If you strike a dog he will snap at the staff which hurts him, as if it were to blame. How doggish we sometimes are, when God is smiting us, we are smarting at His rod. Brother, forgive the man who injured you,--his was the sin, forgive it, as you hope to be forgiven; but yours is the chastisement, and it comes from God, therefore endure it and ask grace to profit by it. When we know "it is the Lord," we readily cry, let Him do what seemeth Him good." As long as I trace my pain to accident, my bereavement to mistake, my loss to another's wrong, my discomfort to an enemy, and so on, I am of the earth, earthly; but when I rise to my God and see His hand at work, I grow calm; I have no word of repining. "Cast thy burden on the Lord" is a precept which it will be easy to practice, when you see that the burden came originally from God.

Afflicted children of God do well to have a keen eye to the wrath that mingles with their troubles. "Thy wrath lieth hard upon me." There is Heman's first point. He does not mention the waves of affliction till he has first spoken of the wrath. We should labor to discover what the Lord means by smiting us; what He purposes by the chastisement, and how far we can answer that purpose. We must use a keen eye clearly to distinguish things. There is an anger and an anger, a wrath and a wrath. God is never angry with His children in one sense, but He is in another. As men, all of us have disobeyed the laws of God, and God stands in relationship to all of us as a judge. As a judge, He must execute upon us the penalties of His law, and He must, from the necessity of His nature, be angry with us for having broken that law. That concerns all of the human race. But, the moment a man believes in the Lord Jesus Christ, his offenses are his offenses no longer; they are laid upon Christ Jesus, the substitute, and the anger goes with the sin. The anger of God towards the sins of believers has spent itself upon Christ. Christ has been punished in their stead; the punishment due to their sin has been borne by Jesus Christ.

God forbid that the Judge of all the earth should ever be unjust; it were not just for God to punish a believer for a sin which has been already laid upon Jesus Christ. Hence, the believer is altogether free from all liability to suffer the judicial anger of God, and all risk of receiving a punitive sentence from the Most High. The man is absolved--shall he be judged again? The man has paid the debt--shall he be brought a second time before the judge, as though he were still a debtor? Christ has stood for him in his place and stead, and, therefore, he boldly asks, "Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us" (Rom. 8:33, 34).

Now, then, the Christian man takes up another position; he is adopted into the family of God: he has become God's child. He is under the law of God's house. There is in every house an economy, a law by which the children and servants are ruled. If the child of God breaks the law of the house, the Father will visit His offense with fatherly stripes--a very different kind of visitation from that of a judge. Wide as the poles asunder are the anger of a judge and the anger of a father. The father loves the child while he is angry, and is mainly angry for that very reason; if it were not his child he would probably take no notice of its fault, but because it is his own boy who has spoken an untruth or committed an act of disobedience, he feels he must chastise him, because he loves him. This needs no further explanation. There is a righteous anger in God's heart towards guilty, impenitent men; He feels none of that towards His people.

Now, child of God, if you are suffering today in any way whatever, whether from the ills of poverty or bodily sickness, or depression of spirits, remember there is not a drop of the judicial anger of God in it all. You are not being punished for your sins as a judge punishes a culprit. Never believe such false doctrine; it is

contrary to the truth as it is in Jesus.

But we must use the eye of our judgment in looking at our present affliction to see and confess how richly, as children, we deserve the rod. Go back to the time since you were converted, and consider: do you wonder that God chastened you? Speaking for myself, I wonder that I have ever escaped the rod at any time. If I had been compelled to say "All day long have I been plagued, and chastened every morning" (Ps. 73:14), I should not have marvelled, for my shortcomings are many. How ungrateful have we been, how unloving, how unlovable, how false to our holiest vows, and how unfaithful to our most sacred consecrations. Is there a single ordinance over which we have not sinned? Did we ever rise from our knees without having offended while at prayer? Did we ever get through a hymn without some wandering of mind or coldness of heart? Did we ever read a chapter which we might not have wept over, because we did not receive the truth in the love of it into our soul as we ought to have done? O, good Father, if we smart, richly do we deserve that we should yet smart again.

When you have confessed your ill-desert, let me exhort you to use those same eyes zealously to search out the particular sin which has caused the present chastisement. "Oh," says one, "I do not think I should ever find it out." You might. Perhaps it lies at the very door. I do not wonder that some Christians suffer; I should wonder if they did not. I have seen them, for instance, neglect family prayer and other household duties; and their sons have grown up to dishonor them. If they cry out, "What an affliction," we would not like to say, "Ah, but you might have expected it; you were the cause of it"; but such a saying would be true. When children have left the parental roof and gone into sin, we have not been surprised when the father has been harsh, sour, and crabbed in temper. We did not expect to gather figs of thorns or grapes of thistles. We have seen men whose whole thought was, "Get money, get money," and yet they have professed to be Christians. Such persons have been fretful and unhappy, but we have not been astonished. No, if they walk frowardly with Him, He will show Himself froward to them.

But sometimes the cause of the chastisement lies further off. Every surgeon will tell you that there are diseases which become troublesome in the prime of life, or in old age, which may have been occasioned in youth by some wrong doing, or by accident, and the evil may have lain latent all those years. So may the sins of our youth bring upon us the sorrows of our riper years, and faults and omissions of twenty years ago may scourge us today. I know it is so. If the fault may be of so great an age, it should lead us to more thorough search and to more frequent prayer. Bunyan tells us that Christian met with Apollyon and had such a dark journey through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, because of slips he made when going down the hill into the Valley of Humiliation. It may be so with us. Perhaps when you were young, you were very untender towards persons of a sorrowful spirit; you are such yourself now-your harshness is visited upon you. It may be that, when in better circumstances, you were wont to look down upon the poor and despise the needy; your pride is chastened now. We have seen men who could ride the high horse among their fellowcreatures, and speak very loftily, and when they have been brought very, very low, we have understood the riddle. God will visit His children's transgressions. He will frequently let common sinners go on throughout life unrebuked; but not so His children. If you were going home today and saw a number of boys throwing stones and breaking windows, you might not interfere with them; but if you saw your own lad among them, I am sure you would fetch him out and make him repent of it.

Perhaps the chastisement may be sent by reason of a sin as yet undeveloped-some latent proneness to evil. The grief may be meant to unearth the sin, that you may hunt it down. Have you any idea of what a devil you are by nature? None of us know what we are capable of, if left by grace. We think we have a sweet temper, an amiable disposition! We shall see!! We fall into provoking company, and are so teased

and insulted, and so cleverly touched in our raw places, that we become mad with wrath, and our fine amiable temper vanishes in smoke, not without leaving poor testimony behind. Is it not a dreadful thing to be so stirred up? Yes it is, but if our hearts were pure no sort of stirring would pollute them. Stir pure water as long as you like and no mud will rise. The evil is bad when seen, but it was quite as bad when not seen. It may be a great gain to a man to know what sin is in him, for then he will humble himself before his God and begin to combat his propensities. If he had never seen the filth, he would never have swept the house; if he had never felt the pain, the disease would have lurked within; but now that he feels the pain, he will fly to the remedy. Sometimes, therefore, trial may be sent that we may discern the sin within us and confess it.

Now one word of caution! Do not let us expect, when we are in the trouble, to perceive any immediate benefit resulting from it. I have tried myself when under sharp pain to see whether I have grown a bit more resigned, or more earnest in prayer, or more rapt in fellowship with God; and I confess I have never been able to see the slightest trace of improvement at such times, for pain distracts and scatters the thoughts. Remember that word, "Nevertheless, afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness" (Heb. 12:11). The gardner takes his knife and prunes the fruit trees to make them bring forth more fruit; his little child comes trudging at his heels and cries, "Father, I do not see that the fruit comes on the trees after you have cut them." "No, dear child, it is not likely you would; but come round in a few months when the season of fruit has come, and then you shall see the golden apples, which thank the knife." Graces, which are meant to endure, require time for their production.

Exposition of the Benefits of Trouble

Now, I want to give a very short exposition of the benefits of trouble. This is a great subject. Many a volume has been written upon it.

Severe trouble in a true believer has the effect of loosening the roots of his soul earthward and tightening the anchor-hold of his heart heavenward. How can he love the world which has become so drear to him? Why should he seek after grapes so bitter to his taste? Should he not now ask for the wings of a dove that he may fly away to his own dear country and be at rest forever? Every mariner on the sea of life knows that, when the soft zephyrs blow, men tempt the open sea with outspread sails; but when the black tempest comes howling from its den, they hurry with all speed to the haven. Afflictions clip our wings with regard to earthly things, so that we cannot fly away from our dear Master's hand, but sit there and sing to Him; but the same afflictions make our wings grow with regard to heavenly things; we are feathered like eagles, we catch the soaring spirit, a thorn is in our nest, and we spread our pinions towards the sun.

Affliction frequently opens truths to us, and opens us to the truth. I know not which of these two is the more difficult. Experience unlocks truths which else were closed against us; many passages of Scripture will never be made clear by the commentator; they must be expounded by experience. Many a text is written in a secret ink which must be held to the fire of adversity to make it visible. I have heard that you see stars in a well when none are visible above ground, and I am sure you can discern many a starry truth, when you are down in the depths of trouble, which would not be visible to you elsewhere. Besides, I said it opened us to the truth as well as the truth to us. We are superficial in our beliefs: we are often drenched with truth, and yet it runs off from us like water from a marble slab; but affliction, as it were, ploughs us and subsoils us, and opens up our hearts, so that, into our innermost nature the truth penetrates and soaks like rain into ploughed land. Blessed is that man who receives the truth of God into his inmost self; he shall never lose it, but it shall be the life of his spirit.

Affliction, when sanctified by the Holy Spirit, brings much glory to God out of Christians, through their experience of the Lord's faithfulness to them. I delight to hear an aged Christian giving his own personal testimony of the Lord's goodness. Vividly upon my mind flashes an event of some twenty-five years ago; it is before me as if it had occurred yesterday, when I saw a venerable man of eighty years, grey and blind with age, and heard him in simple accents, simple as the language of a child, tell how the Lord had led him, and had dealt with him, so that no good thing had failed of all that God had promised. He spoke as though he were a prophet, his years lending force to his words. But suppose he had never known a trial, what testimony could he have borne? Had he been lapped in luxury and never endured suffering, he might have stood there dumb and have been as useful as if he had spoken. We must be tried or we cannot magnify the faithful God, who will not leave His people.

Affliction conforms us to the Lord Jesus. We pray to be like Christ, but how can we be, if we are not men of sorrows at all, and never become acquainted with grief? Like Christ, and yet never traverse through the vale of tears! Like Christ, and yet have all that heart could wish, and never bear the contradiction of sinners against thyself, and never say, "My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death!" O, sir, thou knowest not what thou dost ask. Hast thou said, "Let me sit on thy right hand in thy Kingdom"? It cannot be granted to you unless you will also drink of His cup and be baptized with His baptism. Share His sorrow, then share His glory.

Once more, our sufferings are of great service to us when God blesses them, for they help us to be useful to others. It must be a terrible thing for a man never to have suffered physical pain. You say, "I should like to be that man." Ah, unless you had extraordinary grace, you would grow hard and cold; you would get to be a sort of castiron man, breaking other people with your touch. No; let my heart be tender, even be soft, if it must be softened by pain, for I would fain know how to bind up my fellow's wound. Let my eye have a tear ready for my brother's sorrows, even if in order to that, I should have to shed ten thousand for my own. As escape from suffering would be an escape from the power to sympathize, and that were to be deprecated beyond all things. Luther was right, when he said, affliction was the best book in the minister's library. If the man of God who is to minister to others could be always robust, it were perhaps a loss; if he could be always sickly, it might be equally so; but for the pastor to be able to range through all the places where the Lord suffers his sheep to go, is doubtless to the advantage of his flock.

Be thankful then, dear brethren, be thankful for trouble; and above all, be thankful because it will soon be over, and we shall be in the land where these things will be spoken of with great joy. As soldiers show their scars and talk of battles, when they come at last to spend their old age in the country at home; so shall we in the dear land to which we are hastening, speak of the goodness and faithfulness of God, which brought us through all the trials of the way. I would not like to stand in the white-robed host and hear it said, "These are they that come out of great tribulation, all except that one." Would you like to be there to see yourself pointed at as the one saint who never knew a sorrow? We will be content to share the battle, for we shall soon wear the crown and wave the palm.

I know while I am preaching some of you have said, "Ah, these people of God have a hard time of it." So have you. The ungodly do not escape from sorrow by their sin. I never heard of a man escaping from poverty through being a spendthrift. I never heard of a man who escaped from headache or drunkenness or from bodily pain by licentiousness. I have heard the opposite; and if there be griefs to the holy, there are others for you. Only mark this, ungodly ones, mark this. For you these things work no good. You pervert them to mischief; but for the saints, they work eternal benefit. For you your sorrows are punishments; they are not so to the child of God. You are punished for your transgressions, but the child of God is not. And

let us tell you, too, that if this day you happen to be in peace and prosperity, plenty and happiness-yet there is not one child of God, in the very depths of trouble that would change places with you under any consideration whatever.

"Let God do as He pleases," we say, "for a while here; we believe our worst state to be better than your best." Do you think we love God for what we get out of Him, and for nothing else? Is that your notion of a Christian's love to God? This is how the ungodly talk, and that is what the devil thought was Job's case. Says he: "Does Job fear God for naught? Hast thou not set a hedge about him, and all that he has?" (Job 1:9, 10). The devil does not understand real love and affection; but the child of God can tell the devil to his face that he loves God if he covers him with sores and sets him on the dunghill, and by God's good help he means to cling to God through troubles tenfold heavier than those he has had to bear, should they come upon him. Is He not a blessed God? Aye, let the beds of our sickness ring with it: He is a blessed God. In the night watches, when we are weary, and our brain is hot and fevered, and our soul is distracted, we yet confess that He is a blessed God. Every ward of the hospital, where believers are found, should echo with that note. A blessed God? "Aye, that He is," say the poor and needy here this morning, and so say all God's poor throughout all the land. A blessed God? "Aye," say His dying people, "as he slays us we will bless His name. He loves us, and we love Him; and, though all His waves go over us, and His wrath lieth sore upon us, we would not change with kings on their thrones, if they are without the love of God."

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