

The Path of Tribulation

(Hebrews 10:32-34)

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God has not promised His people a smooth path through this world; instead, He has ordained that “we must through much tribulation” enter His kingdom (Acts 14:22). Why should it be otherwise, seeing we are now in a territory which is under His curse. And what has brought down that curse, but *sin*. Seeing then that there still is a world of sin both without and within each one of us, why should it be thought strange if we are made to taste the bitterness of its products! Suppose it were otherwise, what would be the effect? Suppose this present life were free from sorrows, sufferings, separations; ah, would we not be content with our present portion? Wisely then has God ordered it that we should be constantly reminded of the fact “*this is not your rest, because it is polluted*” (Mic. 2:10). Trials and tribulations are needful if there is to be wrought in us “a desire to depart and to be with Christ, which is far better” (Phil. 1:23).

The word “tribulation” is derived from the Latin “tribulum,” which was a flail used by the Romans to separate the wheat from the chaff. How much “chaff” remains even in the one who has been genuinely converted! How much of the “flesh” mingles with and mars his spiritual exercises! How much which is merely “natural” is mixed with his youthful zeal and energetic activities! How much of carnal wisdom and leaning unto our own understanding there is, till God is pleased to deepen His work of grace in the soul! And one of the principal instruments which He employs in that blessed work is the “tribulum” or flail. By means of sore disappointments, thwarted plans, inward fightings, painful afflictions, does He “take forth the precious from the vile” (Jer. 15:19), and remove the dross from the pure gold. It is by weaning us from the things of earth that He fits us for setting our affections on things above. It is by drying up creature-streams of satisfaction that He makes His children thirst for the Fountain of living water.

“Tribulation worketh patience” (Rom. 5:3). Patience is a grace which has both a passive and an active side. Passively, it is a meekly bowing to the sovereign pleasure of God, a saying, “The cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?” (John 18:11). Actively, it is a steady perseverance in the path of duty. This is one of the great ends which God has in view in the afflicting of His children: to effect in them “a meek and quiet spirit.” “Tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience.” It is one thing to obtain a theoretical knowledge of a truth by means of reading, it is quite another to have a real and inward acquaintance with the same. As the tried and tempest-tossed soul bows meekly to the providential dealings of God, he experimentally learns what is “that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God” (Rom. 12:2). “And experience, hope,” which is a firm expectation of a continuance of sustaining grace and final glory. Since then our sufferings are one of the means which God has appointed for the Christian’s sanctification, preparing us for usefulness here, and for Heaven hereafter, let us glory in them.

But let us lift our thoughts still higher. “Consider Him that endured such contradiction of sinners against Himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds” (Heb. 12:3). Ah, it is unto *His* image which the saint is predestined to be conformed (Rom. 8:29), first in suffering, and then in glory. Let each troubled and groaning child of God call to remembrance the afflictions through which the Man of sorrows passed! Is it not fitting that the servant should drink of the cup which his Master drank? O my brethren, the highest honor God confers upon any of us in this life, is when He permits us to suffer a little for Christ’s sake. O for grace to say with the beloved apostle, “Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (2 Cor. 12:9). “If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye” (1 Pet. 4:14).

“No man should be moved by these afflictions: for yourselves know that we are appointed thereunto” (1 Thess. 3:3). Yet afflictions do not come upon all saints in the same form, nor to the same degree. God is sovereign in this, as in everything else. He knows what will best promote the spiritual good of His people. All is ordered by Him in infinite wisdom and infinite love. As has been well said, “God had one Son without sin, but none without sorrow.” Yet the sorrow is not unmixed: God tempers His winds unto the lambs. With every temptation or trial He provides a way to escape. In the midst of sorest trouble His all-suffering grace is available. The promise is sure, “Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and He shall sustain thee” (Ps. 55:22), and where faith is enabled to rest in the Lord, His sustaining power is realized in the soul.

Afflictions are not all that the Lord sends His people: He daily loadeth them with His benefits (Ps. 68:19). The smiling of His face greatly outnumber the frowns of His providence. There are far more sunny days than cloudy ones. But our memories are fickle: when we enter the Wilderness, we so quickly forget our exodus from Egypt, and

deliverance at the Red Sea. When water gives out (Ex. 17), we fail to call to remembrance the miraculous supply of manna (Ex. 16). It was thus with the apostles. When they had forgotten to take bread, the Lord Jesus tenderly remonstrated with them, saying, "O ye of little faith... Do ye not understand, neither remember the five loaves of the five thousand and how many baskets ye took up? Neither the seven loaves of the four thousand, and how many baskets ye took up?" (Matthew 16:5-10). O how much peace and joy we lose in the present through our sinful failure in not calling to remembrance the Lord's past deliverances and mercies.

"Thou shalt remember *all* the way which the Lord thy God led thee" (Deut. 8:2). Sit down and *review* God's previous dealings with thee: bring before your hearts His tender patience, His unchanging faithfulness, His powerful interpositions, His gracious gifts. There have been times in the past when your own folly brought you into deep waters of trouble, but God did not cast you off. You fretted and murmured, but God did not abandon you. You were full of fears and unbelief, yet God suffered you not to starve. He neither dealt with you after your sins, nor rewarded you according to your iniquities. Instead, He proved Himself to be *unto you* the "God of *all* grace" (1 Pet. 5:10). There were times in the past when every door of hope seemed fast closed, when every man's hand and heart appeared to be against you, when the Enemy came in like a flood, and it looked very much as though you would be drowned. But help *was* at hand. In the *fourth* watch of the night the Lord Jesus appeared on the waters, and you were delivered. Then *remember* this, and let the realization of past deliverances comfort and stay your heart in the midst of the present emergency.

Many are the appeals made unto us in the Word of God to do this very thing. Varied and numerous are the motives employed by the Holy Spirit in the Scripture of Truth to stir up God's children unto constancy of heart and the performance of duty when "circumstances" seem to be all against them. Every attribute of God is made a distinct ground for urging us to run with perseverance the race that is set before us. The promises of God are given to cheer, and His warnings stir up our hearts unto a fuller compliance with His revealed will. Rewards are promised to those who overcome the flesh, the world, and the Devil, while eternal woes are threatened unto those failing to do so. Faith is to be stimulated by the record given of God's grace which sustained fellow-pilgrims in by-gone days; hope is to be stirred into action by the glorious Goal which the Word holds up to view. And, as we have said, fresh courage for the present is to be drawn by us from calling to mind God's goodness in the past. It is *this* particular motive which the apostle pressed on the Hebrews in the passage which is now before us.

"But call to remembrance the former days, in which, after ye were illuminated, ye endured a great fight of afflictions" (verse 32). In verses 16-21 the apostle had given a brief summary of the inestimable privileges which are the present portion of the regenerated people of God. In verses 22-24 he had exhorted them to make a suitable response to such blessings. In verses 25-31 he had fortified their minds against temptations to apostasy, or to willful and presumptuous sins. He now bids them to recall the earlier days of their profession, and to consider what they had already ventured, suffered and renounced for Christ, and how they had been supernaturally sustained under their trials: the force of this was, disgrace not your former conduct by now casting away your confidence which hath great recompense of reward.

"But call to remembrance the former days, in which, after ye were illuminated." The beginnings of God's work of grace in their souls is here spoken of as being "illuminated." The Holy Spirit had revealed to them their depravity and impotency, their lost and miserable state by nature. He had brought before them the unchanging demands of God's righteous law, and their utter failure to meet those claims. He had pointed them to the Lord Jesus, who, as the Sponsor and Surety of His people, had assumed all their liabilities, kept the law in their stead, and died for their sins. For God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, had "shined into their hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). Thus He had granted unto them an experimental acquaintance with the Gospel, so that they had felt in their own consciences and hearts the power of its truth. How unspeakably solemn is it to note that this too had been the experience of the apostates in Hebrews 6:4-6, for the very word here rendered "illuminated" is there translated, "enlightened."

Right after their illumination by God, they were called upon to feel something of the rage of His enemies. At the beginning of this dispensation those who made profession of Christianity were hotly persecuted, and the believing Hebrews had not escaped. This the apostle would remind them of: "After ye were illuminated, ye endured a great fight of afflictions." As soon as God had quickened their hearts and shone upon their understandings so that they embraced His incarnate Son as their Lord and Savior, earth and hell combined against them. By nature we are in the dark, and while in it we meet with no opposition from Satan or the world; but when, by grace we determined to follow the example which Christ has left us, we were soon brought into the fellowship of His sufferings. By such experiences we are reminded that God has called us to the combat, that as good soldiers of Jesus Christ we are to "endure hardness" (2 Tim. 2:3), and need to take unto ourselves the armor which God has provided (Eph. 6:10-18)—not to speculate about, but to *use* it.

The attitude toward and the conduct of the Hebrew Christians under this “great fight of afflictions” during the days of their “first love,” is here summed up, first, in the one word “endured.” They had not fainted or given way to despondency, nor had they renounced their profession. They failed in no part of the conflict, but came off conquerors. This they had been enabled unto by the efficacious grace of God. They had been wondrously and blessedly supported under their sufferings. From Acts 8 we learn that when the church at Jerusalem was sorely persecuted, its members so far from abandoning Christianity, were scattered abroad, and “went everywhere preaching the Word” (verse 4). How greatly was the Captain of their salvation honored by this valor of His soldiers. It is a noticeable fact of history that *babes* in Christ have often been the bravest of all in facing suffering and death: perhaps because the great and glorious change involved in the passing from death unto life is *fresh* in their minds than in that of older Christians. Now it was to the recollection of these things unto which the apostles here called the flagging and tempted Hebrews.

“But call to remembrance.” “It is not the bare remembrance he intends, for it is impossible men should absolutely forget such a season. Men are apt enough to remember the times of their sufferings, especially such as are here mentioned, accompanied with all sorts of injurious treatments from men. But the apostle would have them *so* call to mind, as to consider withal, what support they had under their sufferings, what satisfaction in them, what deliverance from them, that they might not despond upon the approach of the like trials and evils on the same account. If we remember our sufferings only as unto what is evil and afflictive in them, what we lose, what we endure, and undergo; such a remembrance will weaken and dispirit us, as unto our future trials. Hereon many cast about to deliver themselves for the future, by undue means and sinful compliances, in a desertion of their profession; the thing the apostle was jealous of concerning these Hebrews. But if, withal, we call to mind what was the Cause for which we suffered; the honor that is in such sufferings, outbalancing all the contempt and reproaches of the world; the presence of God enjoyed in them; and the reward proposed unto us; the calling these things to mind, will greatly strengthen us against future trials; provided we retain the same love unto, and valuation of the things for which we suffered, as we had in those former days” (John Owen).

“The remembrance then of past warfare, if it had been carried on faithfully and diligently under the banner of Christ, is at length useful to us, not as a pretext for sloth, as though we had already served our time, but to render us more active in finishing the remaining part of our course. For Christ has not enlisted us on this condition, that we should after a few years ask for a discharge, like soldiers who have served their time, but that we should pursue our warfare even unto the end” (John Calvin). It therefore becomes a solemn and searching question for each of us to face: to what extent am I *now* being antagonized by the world? Something must be seriously wrong with me if I have the goodwill of everybody. God’s Word emphatically declares, “All that will live godly in Christ Jesus *shall* suffer persecution” (2 Tim. 3:12).

“Partly, whilst ye were made a gazing-stock, both by reproaches and afflictions; and partly, whilst ye became companions of them that were so used” (verse 33). In this verse the apostle mentions one or two features of what their “great fight of affliction” had consisted. Some of them were made a public spectacle to their neighbors, by the malicious accusations brought against them, and by the derision and punishment laid upon them; while others were the “partners” of those who were also cruelly treated. The principal reference here is to the loss which they had sustained in their characters and reputations, and unto many people (especially those of a sensitive temperament) this is a sore trial; almost anything is easier to bear than obloquy and disgrace. But sufficient for the disciple to be as his Master: they slandered Him, and said He had a demon.

Reproach and slander are exceedingly trying, and if we are not upon our guard, if we fail to gird up the loins of our minds (1 Pet. 1:13), we are likely to be so cast down by them as to be incapacitated for duty. Despondency and despair are never excusable in the Christian, and must be steadily resisted. We need to make up our minds that if, by grace, we are determined to follow the example which Christ has left us we shall have many enemies—especially in the religious world—who will scruple at no misrepresentations of our motives and actions. We must learn to undervalue our reputations, and be content to be regarded as “the off-scouring of all things;” we must seek grace to emulate Him who “set His face like a flint” (Isa. 50:7), who “endured the cross, *despising* the shame” (Heb. 12:2). Unless we cultivate His spirit we shall be at a great disadvantage when sufferings come upon us.

Not only had the Hebrew Christians suffered personally, but they had fellowship also in the sufferings of others. This is a Christian duty, and, we may add, a privilege. As members of the same Family, as fellow-pilgrims toward the better Country, as called to serve together under the same Banner, it is only meet that we should bear “one another’s burdens,” and “weep with them that weep.” Of Moses it is recorded that “He refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasure of sin for a season” (Heb. 11:24, 25). To be a companion of those who suffer for Christ, is an evidence of our love for His brethren, of courage in suffering, and of readiness to succor those who are persecuted because of the Gospel. We do well to frequently ponder Matthew 25:42-45.

“For ye had compassion of me in my bonds” (verse 34). The apostle here makes grateful acknowledgment of the sympathy which the Hebrews had shown him in an hour of need. The historical reference may be to the time when he lay bound in chains at Jerusalem (Acts 21:33), when their love for him was shown by their prayers, and perhaps letters and gifts. It is the bounden duty for Christians to express in a practical way their compassion for any of Christ’s suffering servants, doing everything in their power to succor, support and relieve them. Equally so is it the duty of God’s ministers to thankfully own the kindness shown them: Christ himself will yet publicly bear witness unto the services of love which have been shown unto His brethren (Matthew 25:34-40).

“For ye had compassion of me in my bonds.” These words supply one of the many proofs that the apostle Paul was the author of this Epistle, for of the other persons whom some have fancied wrote it, such as Luke, Barnabas, Clement etc., there is no hint anywhere in Scripture, nor we believe in ecclesiastical history, of any of them suffering bonds in Judea. But the lying of Paul in bonds and imprisonments, was renowned above all others. Hence he styled himself in particular “Paul, prisoner of Jesus Christ” (Philem. 1:1), and gloried in this peculiar honor as “an ambassador in bonds” (Eph. 6:20), and as such, desired the saints at Colosse to remember him at the throne of grace (Heb. 4:3). Thus, his “bonds” being above all others so familiar, such a subject of the churches’ prayers, this reference here in Hebrews 10:34 at once identifies the writer.

“And took joyfully the spoiling of your goods” (verse 34). This supplies further information upon the deportment of the Hebrews under their trials: they had not only patiently “endured” the great fight of affliction, but were happy in being counted worthy to suffer for Christ—a blessed triumph was that of the mighty grace of God over the weakness of the flesh. God is able to strengthen in the inner man “with all might, according to His glorious power, unto all patience and longsuffering, with joyfulness” (Col. 1:11). Ordinarily, few things are more calculated to distress the minds of men than their being cruelly plundered of those things for which they have labored hard, and which they and their families still need: wailing and lamentations commonly accompany them. Blessed is it when the heart is brought to hold lightly all earthly comforts and conveniences, for it is easier then to part with them should we be called upon to do so.

“Knowing in yourselves that we have in heaven a better and enduring substance” (verse 34). This clause supplies the key to the previous one, showing the ground of their joy. Faith looked away from things seen to those unseen, reckoning that “the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18); “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” (2 Cor. 4:17). Where the heart’s affections are truly set upon things above (Col. 3:2), few tears will be shed over the loss of any earthly baubles. True, it is *natural* to mourn when rudely deprived of material possessions, but it is *supernatural* to rise above such grieving.

The true riches of the Christian are not accessible to human or Satanic plunderers. Men may strip us of all our worldly possessions, but they cannot take from us the love of God, the salvation of Christ, the comforts of the Holy Spirit, the hope of eternal glory. Said one who was waylaid by a bandit, who demanded his money or his life: “Money, I have none on me; my *life* is hid with Christ in God.” The poor worldling may give way to despair when business is bad, bonds deteriorate, and banks smash, but no child of God ought ever to do so: he has been begotten unto an inheritance which is “incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven” (1 Pet. 1:4). Yet it is only as faith is in exercise, as the heart is really occupied with our heavenly portion, that we *enjoy* them, and regard all else as but “vanity and vexation of spirit.”

“What was it that enabled them thus to bear up under their sufferings? They knew in themselves that they had in heaven a better and a more enduring substance. Observe, First; the happiness of the saints in heaven is ‘substance,’ something of real weight and worth—all things here are but shadows. Secondly, it is a better substance than anything they can have or lose here. Thirdly, it is an enduring substance; it will outlive time, and run parallel with eternity. They can never spend it; their enemies can never take it from them as they did their earthly goods. Fourthly, this will make a rich amends for all they can lose and suffer here. In heaven they shall have a better life, a better estate, better liberty, better society, better hearts, better work, everything better” (Matthew Henry).

“Knowing in yourselves that we have in heaven a better and an enduring substance.” Let us now weigh carefully the first three words of this clause: these Hebrew saints had a firm conviction of heart concerning their heavenly portion. It does not say, “knowing from God’s promises,” but “knowing *in yourselves*.” This presents a side of the Truth, an aspect of Christian assurance, which is rarely dwelt upon in these days; instead, it is widely ridiculed and denied, many insisting that the only basis of assurance is the bare letter of Scripture. It is quite true that the foundation of our confidence is the written Word, but that is *not* the *only* ground, any more than a marriage certificate is the sole proof which a woman has that the man who loves, cherishes, and lives with her, is her husband. No, one has only to read impartially through the first Epistle of John in order to discover that he who is walking with God and enjoying the light of His countenance, has many evidences that he is a new creature in Christ Jesus.

“Knowing in yourselves.” The one who is following on to know the Lord (Hos. 6:3), not only has the testimony of God’s Word without, but he has also the witness of the Spirit within him, that he is a child and heir of God (Rom. 8:16, 17). In his regeneration and begun experimental sanctification, he has received “the first-fruits of the Spirit (Rom. 8:23). In consequence, he now has new desires, new conflicts, new joys, new sorrows. Faith purifies his heart (Acts 15:9). He has received the Spirit of adoption, whereby he cries “Abba Father.” From what he finds in his own heart, he *knows* that he is heaven-born and heaven-bound. Let those who are strangers to a supernatural work of grace in their own hearts mock and scoff all they please, let them sneer at introspection, call it mysticism, or any thing else they wish, but one who is scripturally assured of the Spirit’s work within him, refuses to be laughed-out of his surest proof that *he* is a child of God.

Granted that many have been and are deluded: acknowledging that the unregenerate heart is “deceitful above all things;” admitting that the Devil has lulled thousands into hell by means of happy feelings within them; yet none of these things alter or affect to the slightest degree the fact that it is both the duty and privilege of every genuine Christian to know *in himself* that he has passed from death unto life. Provided he be denying self, taking up his cross, and following Christ in the path of obedience, he will have cause for rejoicing in the testimony of a good conscience (2 Cor. 1:12). But if he yields to lusts of the flesh, fellowships with an ungodly world, and gets into a backslidden state, then the joy of his salvation will be lost. Nothing then is of greater practical importance than that the Christian should keep clean and unstained his inward evidences that he is journeying toward heaven.

“Such, then, are the things which the apostle wishes the Hebrew Christians to ‘call to remembrance.’ It is easy to see how the calling of these things to remembrance was calculated to serve his purpose—to guard them from apostasy, and establish them in the faith and profession of the Gospel. It is as if he had said, ‘Why shrink from suffering for Christianity now? Were you not exposed to suffering from the beginning? When you first became Christians, did you not willingly undergo sufferings on account of it? And is not Christianity as worthy of being suffered for as ever? Is not Jesus the same yesterday, and today, and forever? Did not the faith and hope of Christianity formerly support you under your sufferings, and make you feel that they were but the light afflictions of a moment? and are they not as able to support you now as then? Has the substance in heaven become less real, or less enduring? and have you not as good evidence now as you had then that to the persevering Christian such treasure is laid up? Are you willing to lose all the benefit of the sacrifices you have made, and the sufferings you have sustained? and they will all go for nothing if you endure not unto the end!’ These are considerations all naturally suggested by the words of the apostle, and all well calculated to induce them ‘to hold fast the profession of their faith without wavering’.” (John Brown)