

I HAVE NOT ALWAYS FOUND IT EASY TO PRACTICE THIS DUTY; THIS I CONFESS TO MY SHAME. WHEN SUFFERING EXTREME PAIN SOME TIME AGO, A BROTHER IN CHRIST SAID TO ME, "HAVE YOU THANKED GOD FOR THIS?" I REPLIED THAT I DESIRED TO BE PATIENT, AND WOULD BE THANKFUL TO RECOVER. "BUT," SAID HE, "IN EVERYTHING GIVE THANKS, NOT AFTER IT IS OVER, BUT WHILE YOU ARE STILL IN IT, AND PERHAPS WHEN YOU ARE ENABLED TO GIVE THANKS FOR THE SEVERE PAIN, IT WILL CEASE." I BELIEVE THAT THERE WAS MUCH FORCE IN THAT GOOD ADVICE.

(CHARLES HADDON SPURGEON)



Lord, I Thank You for Wooden Pews

The church in which I grew up, lo so many years ago, was filled with lots of old wood, and the pews—though sculpted to fit the average Baptist posterior—were of hard, well-polished, dark oak. No pads; no cushioned upholstery. Just hard—*very* hard wood.

You had to really work at falling asleep in those pews. Their simple discomfort was sufficient to keep the parishioner alert to every word of the pastor's sermon.

Every day, just after lunch, between one and three o'clock, I am sorely tempted to put in some quality "think" time in the soft easy chair that sits just a few feet away from my desk. Once in a while (not every day, of course) I convince myself that lying back in the soft comfort of the chair will facilitate

deep thought and profound insight, when, in fact, what it really facilitates is deep and profound slumber. Five minutes, ten minutes tops, and I'm out cold.

I'm thankful for those uncomfortable things that keep me awake to God. We live in a time when personal comfort reigns supreme, falling in priority just slightly behind incredible wealth. People don't like sitting on hard pews—in fact, most people don't much enjoy sitting on pews made from *any* material. On a Sunday morning they'd much rather be trudging across a golf course or snoring into their pillow. The idea of voluntarily sitting still for sixty minutes of religion is enough to send some people rolling about the floor in hysterics.



I'm grateful that the things of God don't come naturally, that sometimes they leave bruises, or flat indentations in my flesh from too much pressure.

After all, ask any billionaire if it was easy acquiring his or her wealth; 99.9% of them will tell you it took long, hard work. Ask a movie star if they became famous overnight and they'll tell you it actually took many years of paying their dues in obscurity. Ask anyone of high political office if it was handed to them on a platter, and they'll

inform you that it took a lot of hard slogging up through the ranks (then they'll hit you up for a contribution).

So why should religion be any different? Why should the all-powerful God of the universe settle for any less than a billionaire, a movie star, or a politician? Comfort invariably spawns complacency, and Christians without at least a few scars or indentations are probably not trying hard enough.

But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober.

1 Thessalonians 5:4-6

Lord, I thank You for my Imperfections

SOME BRETHREN AND SISTERS BELIEVE THEMSELVES TO BE PERFECT. BUT IF YOU WATCH THOSE IN WHOM SIN IS SAID TO BE DEAD, YOU WILL FIND THAT IF IT IS DEAD, IT IS NOT BURIED, AND THAT IT SMELLS REMARKABLY LIKE OTHER DEAD THINGS WHICH OUGHT TO BE BURIED. IT IS, POSSIBLY, WORSE THAN WHEN IT WAS ALIVE, FOR IT HAS BECOME ALIVE AGAIN, IN AN EVEN WORSE SENSE, WITH A DOUBLE PUTRIDITY.

(SPURGEON)

Everyone, I am sure, would choose to be perfect rather than imperfect, but since Adam's untimely fall, the latter condition has been our lot, so there's little we can do about it. The apostle Paul understood the value of imperfections.

On behalf of such a man I will boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses. For if I do wish to boast I will not be foolish, for I will be speaking the truth; but I refrain from this, so that no one will credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me.

Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

2 Corinthians 12:5-10

Some imperfections are meant to be dealt with, toward the goal of eradication, but some are to be, rather, embraced, for their purpose of pointing us toward the perfection of Christ.

While the thought may be abhorrent to some, the Christian life is one of depen-

dency—dependence on God for His grace and mercy, dependence on Jesus Christ for His salvation and ongoing intercession, and dependence on the Holy Spirit for our daily walk. Someone who is perfect is not dependent on anyone, for they are self-sufficient. Sort of like God.

"As for God, His way is blameless;
The word of the Lord is tested;
He is a shield to all who take refuge in Him.
For who is God, besides the Lord?
And who is a rock, besides our God?"

2 Samuel 22:31-32

So why should I waste my time trying to compete against God, while I could, instead, revel in those qualities that draw me closer to His perfection.

One reason we strive so against our own imperfections is that we are painfully aware of how unpleasant they are in others. The image that snaps back at us from the darkened mirror of their life is uncomfortable, and ignites a passion within us to extinguish once and for all those same qualities in our own.

But when we gaze upon the pristine Christ, there are no unpleasant reflections; only purity, holiness, perfection. We see nothing that might remind us of our own inadequacies—only acceptance, understanding, love.

Perfection in man would mean the death of grace. Were tomorrow to usher in the age

of man's perfection, it would mean, by its very definition, that we had stepped into the age of sufficiency—and anyone who is sufficient clearly has no need for God. And what a sorry place this world would be without Him.

Happily, we need not concern ourselves with this fanciful eventuality. We are—and

I'm sure will remain—imperfect, and in this state are suitable receptacles for God's limitless grace. Every inhabitant of the earth is imperfect, but the Christian enjoys a strengthening partnership with the Lord, which raises us (in essence, if not in practice) up to His level of perfection. In *Him* we find our sufficiency.

Lord, I thank You for not answering my prayers Right Away

NEVER WAS A FAITHFUL PRAYER LOST. SOME PRAYERS HAVE A LONGER VOYAGE THAN OTHERS, BUT THEN THEY RETURN WITH THEIR RICHER LADING AT LAST, SO THAT THE PRAYING SOUL IS A GAINER BY WAITING FOR AN ANSWER.

(WILLIAM GURNALL)

God's word is filled with references to His attentiveness to our prayers:

And those who know Your name will put their trust in You,
For You, O Lord, have not forsaken those who seek You.

Psalm 9:10

The eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous
And His ears are open to their cry.

Psalm 34:15

"In that day you will ask in My name, and I do not say to you that I will request of the Father on your behalf; for the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me and have believed that I came forth from the Father."

John 16:26-27

But nowhere does His word tell us precisely *when* He intends to answer our petitions—nor in what manner.

I'm grateful for those times when the Lord reminds me that I do not enjoy the privilege of dictating the terms of my prayer life. I'm grateful for those reminders that it is the one *receiving* the prayer that is responsible for its result.

Were the Lord to respond according to my schedule, He would instantly have abdicated His position of authority; He would, in a moment, become someone capable of being manipulated by a mere mortal. And who

would choose to pray to such a god? What would be the point?

If we trust God enough to pray to Him, then we should trust Him to answer our prayers at the right time.

Now I say that the heir, as long as he is a child, does not differ at all from a slave, though he is master of all, but is under guardians and stewards until the time appointed by the father. Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world. But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.

Galatians 4:1-5 nkjv

While we grow ever more impatient, God's timing—like every other part of

Him—is impeccable. He is not influenced by our misplaced urgency, but says, rather, "Trust me."



*O for a faith that will not shrink
Tho pressed by many a foe,
That will not tremble on the brink
Of any earthly woe;*

*That will not murmur nor complain
Beneath the chast'ning rod,
But in the hour of grief or pain
Will lean upon its God;*

*A faith that shines more bright and clear
When tempests rage without,
That, when in danger, knows no fear,
In darkness feels no doubt.*

*Lord, give me such a faith as this,
And then, whate'er may come,
I'll taste e'en now the hallowed bliss
Of an eternal home.*

(William H. Bathurst)

Lord, I thank You for persistent Pain

The reason for pain is elusive—a quandary that can make the discomfort even more difficult to bear. Why are some stricken when others are not? Why are so many who are “good” destined to live with pain, while the “bad” often are not?

There are some who claim that persistent pain is always attributable to sin—that some wrong in a person’s life has called down God’s correcting hand. But Jesus told His disciples that that was not always the case.

As He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?” Jesus answered, “It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him.

John 9:1-3

Others will say that pain comes so that we might better understand and empathize with the pain experienced by others. But that would only explain *some* of the suffering that exists in the world. What about the rest?

Still others will claim that pain and suffering are stinging darts from Satan, sent to punish us for our allegiance to Christ, or to beat us into denouncing His name. But, while it is true that Satan works at our lives—and often in painful ways—understanding that he may be the source of our affliction still helps us very little in knowing what to do about it.

I’m grateful that God doesn’t force me to identify the source of my—or others’—persistent pain. I’m grateful that He gives me the freedom to ignore the source of the pain to concentrate on the result. There is great liberty in knowing that from wherever pain might come, its ultimate purpose is to glorify God. Why, for example, did Paul have a persistent “thorn in the flesh”?

And He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I will

rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

2 Corinthians 12:9-10

Why do we share in Christ’s sufferings?

...so that we may also be glorified with Him.

Romans 8:17b

Why are we told to rejoice, even though we may have to suffer “grief in all kinds of trials”?

...so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ;

1 Peter 1:7

And why did Job not curse God when He gave Satan permission to heap unbearable sufferings on His servant?

...“Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?” In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

Job 2:10b

If we are to lift up the good and pleasant things in our life as offerings of praise and adoration, then we are to do the same with our trials through pain. But certainly no amount of gratitude or praise will soften the physical effect of pain. And that’s the point: God doesn’t bring trials into our life because they are pleasant; He *intends* the discomfort.

Learning how to bear persistent or continuous pain ultimately means coming to grip with the Lordship of Christ. If He is Lord, and I am His servant, then no matter what comes my way, it has arrived at His bidding.

I AM PROGRESSING ALONG THE PATH OF LIFE IN MY ORDINARY CONTENTEDLY FALLEN AND GODLESS CONDITION, ABSORBED IN A MERRY MEETING WITH MY FRIENDS FOR THE MORROW OR A BIT OF WORK THAT TICKLES MY VANITY TODAY, A HOLIDAY OR A NEW BOOK, WHEN SUDDENLY A STAB OF ABDOMINAL PAIN THAT THREATENS SERIOUS DISEASE, OR A HEADLINE IN THE NEWSPAPERS THAT THREATENS US ALL WITH DESTRUCTION, SENDS THIS WHOLE PACK OF CARDS TUMBLING DOWN. AT FIRST I AM OVERWHELMED, AND ALL MY LITTLE HAPPINESSES LOOK LIKE BROKEN TOYS...

AND PERHAPS, BY GOD’S GRACE, I SUCCEED, AND FOR A DAY OR TWO BECOME A CREATURE CONSCIOUSLY DEPENDENT ON GOD AND DRAWING ITS STRENGTH FROM THE RIGHT SOURCES. BUT THE MOMENT THE THREAT IS WITHDRAWN, MY WHOLE NATURE LEAPS BACK TO THE TOYS...

THUS THE TERRIBLE NECESSITY OF TRIBULATION IS ONLY TOO CLEAR. GOD HAS HAD ME FOR BUT FORTY-EIGHT HOURS AND THEN ONLY BY DINT OF TAKING EVERYTHING ELSE AWAY FROM ME. LET HIM BUT SHEATHE THAT SWORD FOR A MOMENT AND I BEHAVE LIKE A PUPPY WHEN THE HATED BATH IS OVER—I SHAKE MYSELF AS DRY AS I CAN AND RACE OFF TO REACQUIRE MY COMFORTABLE DIRTINESS, IF NOT IN THE NEAREST MANURE HEAP, AT LEAST IN THE NEAREST FLOWER BED. AND THAT IS WHY TRIBULATIONS CANNOT CEASE UNTIL GOD EITHER SEES US REMADE OR SEES THAT OUR REMAKING IS NOW HOPELESS.

(C.S. LEWIS)

*Be still, my soul: the Lord is on thy side;
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain;
Leave to thy God to order and provide;
In every change He faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul: thy best, thy heav’nly Friend
Thro’ thorny ways leads to a joyful end.*

*Be still, my soul: thy God doth undertake
To guide the future as He has the past.
Thy hope, thy confidence let nothing shake;
All now mysterious shall be bright at last.
Be still, my soul: the waves and winds still know
His voice who ruled them while He dwelt below.*

*Be still, my soul: the hour is hast’ning on
When we shall be forever with the Lord,
When disappointment, grief, and fear are gone,
Sorrow forgot, love’s purest joys restored.
Be still, my soul: when change and tears are past,
All safe and blessed we shall meet at last.*

(Katharina Amalia von Schlegel)

Lord, I thank You for those times when my own efforts Fail

WE TEND TO SAY THAT BECAUSE A PERSON HAS NATURAL ABILITY, HE WILL MAKE A GOOD CHRISTIAN. IT IS NOT A MATTER OF OUR EQUIPMENT, BUT A MATTER OF OUR POVERTY; NOT OF WHAT WE BRING WITH US, BUT OF WHAT GOD PUTS INTO US; NOT A MATTER OF VIRTUES, OF STRENGTH OF CHARACTER, OF KNOWLEDGE, OR OF EXPERIENCE—ALL OF THAT IS OF NO AVAIL IN THIS CONCERN. THE ONLY THING OF VALUE IS BEING TAKEN INTO THE COMPELLING PURPOSE OF GOD AND BEING MADE HIS FRIENDS. GOD'S FRIENDSHIP IS WITH PEOPLE WHO KNOW THEIR POVERTY. HE CAN ACCOMPLISH NOTHING WITH THE PERSON WHO THINKS THAT HE IS OF USE TO GOD.

(OSWALD CHAMBERS)

When I think I have something that could be of use to God, I have failed to grasp His omnipotence and sovereignty; as soon as I empty myself of such presumption and pride, I then become a suitable vessel for His power.

...in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness," is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves;

2 Corinthians 4:4-7

In the U.S. Navy boot camp, back in the late sixties, Company Commanders were free to do just about whatever they pleased to the raw recruits. Their verbal abuse flew like projectiles at a cow-chip throwing contest and, different from today, they were free to physically knock us about at will. The Company Commander's favorite word for his hapless charges was "worms." We were lowly, worthless worms. Lowest of the low. Not worth the time it took for him even to utter the word.

That's the image the ill-informed have of our willingness to have God fill us with His glory rather than our own. They think that God considers us to be (or wishes us to think of ourselves as) filthy, worthless lowlives.

But when a person has been sanctified by the blood of Christ, he or she only exchanges temporal abilities and vanities for the eternal glory and value of God. What changes is the goal—the prize.

According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones,

wood, hay, straw, each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

1 Corinthians 3:10-15

Take, for example, a successful athlete. He is a perfect specimen of robust masculinity, and, as such, is a wide receiver for the NFL. His gridiron exploits make him famous and wealthy—he's got it made.

One day God says, "That's my man. I've got plans for him in my Kingdom." So in the next game, this incredible athlete is brutally tackled and, in an instant, becomes permanently paralyzed from the waist down.

And God says, "Good. Now I can use him."

To the casual observer this would seem to be a complete waste. Here was a man who had it all: he was rich, healthy and strong. With all of that he could really have been valuable to the Lord's work. But all of that—all the wealth, the fame, the physical health—every bit of it was nothing but hay and straw, that would be burned up in the final day. None of those assets and abilities were of *eternal* value.

Now, however, God has this man in a wheelchair; He has humbled him. Over a period of time the once rich and successful athlete becomes a powerful witness to the youth in the country. He tells them about the love of God, and the sacrifice Jesus made for them, and many come to the Lord because of his testimony. And every one of those souls, every child saved and brought into the Kingdom, is a small piece of silver or gold—something to last for all eternity.

When I try to do it on my own, the result is only highly combustible material. I'm grateful for those times when my efforts fail, for that failure is a necessary reminder of how much more successful I will be—in eternal terms—when, instead, I permit God to work *through* me.

*In heav'nly love abiding,
No change my heart shall fear;
And safe is such confiding,
For nothing changes here.
The storm may roar without me,
My heart may low be laid,
But God is round about me,
And can I be dismayed?*

*Wherever He may guide me,
No want shall turn me back;
My shepherd is beside me,
And nothing can I lack.
His wisdom ever waketh;
His sight is never dim.
He knows the way He taketh,
And I will walk with Him.*

*Green pastures are before me,
Which yet I have not seen;
Bright skies will soon be o'er me,
Where darkest clouds have been.
My hope I cannot measure;
My path to life is free;
My Savior has my treasure,
And He will walk with me.*

(Anna Laetitia Waring)



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