

Finding Joy When Everything's Going Wrong

My minister dad was “out of a church,” a term used to describe an unemployed pastor.

A congregation invited him and two others to preach as candidates on successive Sundays. Being the first of three candidates, Dad was sure that by the time the third minister had preached, he would be forgotten.

The day of the church election my dad stayed in bed all day, sick. Without a paycheck for several months he feared he would have to leave the calling he felt God had placed on his life.

But at 10 p.m. the phone rang. It was the head deacon warmly conveying the invitation of the church for Dad to become pastor.

The next day my dad looked and acted like a completely different man. In his whole life I never saw him more satisfied and happy. What a difference a day makes.

Psalm 66 is one you sing when all has turned out well.

Can You Relate?

Like my dad during his months of unemployment, you may feel like this psalm will never describe you since you presently have no shout of joy (vv. 1-2), no sense of God's powerful sovereignty (v. 3), no overflowing of praise (v. 4), no desire to invite anyone to remember God's past miracles (vv. 5-6) and little confidence in God's power (v. 7).

But this glad psalm does not forget the dark passage, the deep trial preceding victory. “He has preserved our lives and kept our feet from slipping” (v. 9).

The psalmist looks back and remembers the moments on the precipice of need or despair.

Refining fire

Looking through the rearview mirror of your own personal spiritual history gives you opportunity to reflect on God's involvement in your hours of peril, "For You, O God, have proved us; You have refined us, as silver is refined" (v. 10).

Fire refines. The hotter the blaze, the purer the end product. What you thought were the evil plans of others or torturous circumstances were actually the instruments God Himself was using to make you a better person, more in His likeness. Like the three Hebrews (Daniel 3), you know now that another was with you in the furnace.

As Hudson Taylor put it, "There are not second causes." All is of God, all that happens in our lives comes from His hand. Not only does God refine you in the trial, your confinement and the exaltation of your enemy over you also are the products of His work. "You brought us into the net; You placed distress on our backs. You have allowed people to ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water; but You brought us out into a well-watered place." (vv. 11,12).

So, Lord, it was You all along who made the going rough. My adversity, my enemy, my loss was Your doing. O God, I was hurting so badly in that place of confinement. My burden was heavier than I thought could be carried. And You let another gain mastery over me—and put me through burning and floods. I thought I was done for in the searing heat or raging waters. But, Lord, just as surely as You brought me into that painful place, also, "You brought us out to a well-watered place" (v. 12).

Review and Rejoice

In verses 5-7, the psalmist reviews the battlefield of his own

trial. He invites, like a guide at Gettysburg, the tourist to “come and see the works of God” (v. 5). Every one of your trials, in some way, recreates the Red Sea experience. God must turn your sea into dry land so you can pass “through the waters on foot.”

“He rules by His power forever” (v. 7). Not just on the occasion of your present difficulty, but into all trials and into all tomorrows.

In verses 13–14, the psalmist pledges his word to God: “I will fulfill my vows to you, which my lips have uttered, and my mouth spoke when I was in trouble.”

Note the testimony: “I will declare what He has done for my soul” (v. 16). That’s the wonderful result from the long night. Before the trial you resorted for comfort to the stores of what God had done for others; now, the testimony of the Lord’s help has become your own.

Purged and Pure

In the testing itself, you became purged from sin. “If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me” (v. 18).

In fact, during the early days of your difficulty there may have been much sin, but the fire melted the dross. The benefit within the trial came as a good conscience, void of offense toward God or man. If sin remains in your heart while passing through dark canyons, then you will not emerge a whole person. You must deal with your own wrong attitudes and actions.

Open yourself to God’s refining fire. At the end of such a time, you will sing this psalm and conclude by affirming: “But certainly God has heard me; He has attended to the voice of my prayer. Blessed be God, who has not turned away my prayer, nor His mercy from me” (vv. 19-20).