

What is God's Purpose in Allowing Affliction and Infirmary?

I used to believe God never used physical affliction to do a spiritual work in the hearts of His people. I was taught that God has many means at His disposal to deepen our love and purify our faith, and sickness and infirmity were not among those tools.

Affliction always comes from the hand of the enemy, I was told, Christ would never send such a thing our way because He died to deliver us from all the works of the enemy. So sickness is never God's will for the saint, and if it lingers then there's something wrong. These were things I believed and preached, until infirmity hit me.

I still believe it is God's will to heal. But the Lord has adjusted my theology in this area and helped me to see that He sometimes uses affliction and infirmity as tools to refine His servants.

Infirmity came to me at a time when I was feeling spiritually dry. I knew there was more in God than what I had experienced, but I couldn't seem to touch it. At that time, a deep cry rose up in my heart, and I sought the Lord fervently for a fuller experience in Him. In retrospect, I realize that that cry was placed in my heart by God—and that He had destined an answer to that cry.

God's answer was to lead me into a great spiritual wilderness, launched through physical infirmity. I became physically handicapped with no hope, according to doctors, of recovery. I went through many months of great darkness as I wrestled with God and pressed into Him to try to understand what He was doing in my life. Slowly I began to understand His purpose in

allowing physical affliction: to build character in us.

I am not saying all sickness and infirmity is intended by God to produce character. Much of it accomplishes nothing but destruction, and God desires that we appropriate the provision of Calvary for divine healing. At times, however, God gives Satan permission to touch us (Job is an example), and He will not bring an immediate solution because He intends for the crisis to produce something deep in our hearts.

Often the Lord uses affliction to correct disobedience. He does not discipline us simply to punish us for wrong behavior, but rather to restore us to right behavior. God's discipline is always for the good. "It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes" (Ps. 119:71).

When affliction strikes, it's wise to let your first response be one of broken repentance. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal any way in which your life may be out of order. But do not assume that the presence of affliction automatically means you need to repent. That was the wrong assumption Job's three friends made, and they incurred God's anger because of it.

Nevertheless, the Scriptures testify, "He who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God" (1 Peter 4:1-2). Physical affliction is instrumental in the hands of God to help us cease from sin.

Affliction naturally produces desperation within us. God purposes that we channel our desperation toward a fervent pursuit of His face. Jesus modeled this for us: "And being in agony, He prayed more earnestly" (Luke 22:44). How did Jesus respond when His pain increased? He sought God more earnestly. This is what God wants you to do.

If you allow your desperation to push you into Christ, you will come to know Him in a profoundly new and intimate way, as the apostle Paul did: "For this reason I also suffer these

things; nevertheless I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed" (2 Tim. 1:12).

Because of his sufferings, he is able to say, "I know whom I have believed."

He is incarcerated, demeaned, shackled, subject to ignominious circumstances in a dungeon, exposed to ridicule and scorn, but there is one thing that causes him not to be ashamed: He knows Jesus!

God did not create pain and sickness in order to cultivate maturity in His people. They are products of sin and the curse. God is the Master Redeemer, however, and He redeems evil circumstances, causing them to further His purposes.

Calamity can thus become a catalyst for accelerated spiritual growth. God's intention is not to keep us interminably in the crisis but to use it to establish His kingdom rule in our lives.

The vital ingredient for turning affliction into maturity is perseverance. Romans 5:3-4 tells us, "We also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope." James 1:2-4 reiterates this truth: "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect [mature] and complete, lacking nothing."

There is no pathway to spiritual maturity apart from perseverance. And there is no perseverance without pressures. Fruitfulness is found only as we endure through crisis and hardship.

I never thought I was judgmental, until infirmity hit. Then the Lord began to show me that I had carried judgmental attitudes toward weak people. When someone was in crisis, my

first inclination was to try to discover where he had blown it. I was insensitive to the fact that some people are caught up in situations over which they have no control.

But I no longer assume that suffering people have done something wrong. That judgmental attitude has been removed by the purifying fires of affliction in my own life.

The Bible says, "Mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 2:13).

Where there is great persecution, there is only one category of Christian: disciples. Where there is no persecution, there are two categories: believers and disciples. The Western world has many believers and few disciples. It's sick.

But in the absence of persecution, God has other ways of applying pressure to His jewels-in-the-making. I'm referring to the fire of delayed answers.

One reason God allows financial, physical and family distress is because He wants the fire of delayed answers to ignite and rekindle our zeal for the Lord.

Where there is no distress, Christianity stagnates. It is maintained in its pristine purity only under inflamed resistance. This is why Jesus said to the believers in Laodicea, "So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth'" (Rev. 3:16).

The church in Laodicea knew very little persecution. The climate was one of religious tolerance. The challenge for the Laodiceans was to serve Christ in the midst of a very permissive, hedonistic society. The Laodicean church had become lukewarm because the fires of resistance had burned low.

So Jesus came to them and said, "I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich" (Rev. 3:18). He issues this same invitation to us.

The Holy Spirit wants to baptize us with fire (Matt. 3:11). One way He does that is in the fiery furnace of affliction. His purpose is to ignite within us a zeal and fervency for the Lord that will restore to us red-hot Christianity.

The disciples asked Jesus why a certain man was born blind. They thought that perhaps he or his parents had sinned. But Jesus said he was born blind, that the works of God should be revealed in him. (John 9:3). Jesus then proceeded to reveal His glory by healing the man.

For reasons we don't fully understand, there are times when the forces of evil are allowed to gain the upper hand over God's people. Daniel says, "I was watching; and the same horn was making war against the saints, and prevailing against them." (Dan. 7:21). In the book of Revelation, John echoes these words: "It was granted to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them." (Rev. 13:7).

Notice that this power is "granted" to the evil one, and he can make no headway against the saints without God's approval.

The verse in Daniel goes on to say, "until the Ancient of Days came, and a judgment was made in favor of the saints of the Most High, and the time came for the saints to possess the kingdom" (Dan. 7:22).

When God renders a judgment on behalf of the saints, everything changes! This is the answer for which we wait.

The book of Revelation also testifies, "The angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land raised up his hand to heaven and swore by Him who lives forever and ever.. that there should be delay no longer" (Rev. 10:5-6). What a wonderful moment! There is coming a day, O afflicted soul, when the Lord will declare, "There shall be delay no longer."

Chances are that some of you reading this article are presently experiencing great affliction. If that's you, take

heart: God will complete the work He is doing in you! "Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:6). His purposes shall be accomplished!



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