

IS GOD PUNISHING ME?

When I am afflicted by difficulties or persecutions or pains, I may be tempted to fall into discouragement and fear that the Almighty is punishing me for past failures, transgressions and sins.

Then, I should immediately recognize that such temptation is an evil assault to weaken my faith and my trust in the living Lord: the loving God, Who gave His all for me.

John 15:13 "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends." [NASB]

I can easily recognize that it is an evil temptation, because it places me across a divide from the Lord, on a side opposite to Him, but — in reality — in the kingdom of God I am as a little child:

Mark 10:15 "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." [NRSV]

and a little child, naturally, is always on the same side as the parent.

It is certainly true that God does not have any tolerance for sin and brings judgment against it: He has, in fact, punished sinners and even annihilated them to cleanse His creation — from the banning of humans out of the garden of Eden to the destruction of the great flood and on.

Romans 5:18a one trespass led to condemnation for all men, [ESV]

It also true that there cannot be any doubt that the utter punishment borne by the Son of God at Calvary is the ultimate cleansing and reconciliation for all those who have accepted the call to believe in the Son, have become new creatures and have entered the kingdom as little children.

Romans 5:19b so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. [NRSV]

Therefore, to fear or even think that now God will punish His children is but blasphemous apostasy; it is fruit of unbelief, as if Calvary was somewhat incomplete and insufficient: as if the sacrifice on the Cross of the sinless Christ was only a partial accommodation and needed yet to be supplemented by something (the collaboration of my sacrifice) to be made complete.

Such belief is not an expression of humility (as if saying or implying "I am not worthy of His grace"); rather of carnal arrogance ("I can add something to the sacrifice of Christ's life").

In this regard, Jesus Himself declared the opposite, in truth:

John 17:4 "I have glorified You on the earth by completing the work You gave Me to do." [HCSB]

Furthermore, as a little child of His, I always have a defender, a supporter: an Advocate,

1 John 2 My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: [KJV]

Of course, I am not worthy of His grace: I have never been worthy of it and never will be worthy. That is why salvation and the Cross are the purest and highest expression of the unconditional love God had for me, in the first place, and continues to have.

God, Who is Love, does not punish His children for sins, which He has already forgiven by commanding His Son to drink the cup of Calvary:

John 18:11b "..... the cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?" [KJV]

Because of His love I cannot — and I must not — harbor fear:

1 John 4:18 There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. [ESV]

His love does not depend on my contributions; rather leads me to love and obey Him:

John 14:15 "If you love me, you will obey my commands." [EXB]

What I am then to make of difficulties, persecutions and pains?

First and most important: His ways are not like mine.

Isaiah 55:8-9 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. ⁹For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. [NRSV]

There are things that God simply will not tell us: no explanation — we are not ready to bear them:

John 16:12-14 "I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." [NASB]

Therefore, I am to practice my trusting Him; not my explaining of His ways.

The second consideration is that God's goal, as declared in the Sermon on the Mount, is that I be perfect:

Matthew 5:48 "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." [NASB]

Since I am a long way from perfection, I need to learn, especially obedience, as Christ Himself did:

Hebrews 5:7-8 *In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety. ⁸Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. [NASB]*

Sometimes indeed the learning is through my suffering; sometimes it is through correction — imparted by the thoughtful and loving Father.

Chastening and correction may be painful: I have to understand they stem from His love for me; not from hate and they are not punishment.

Hebrews 12:5-13 *And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: "My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; ⁶For whom the Lord loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives." ⁷If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? ⁸But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. ⁹Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. ¹¹Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. ¹²Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, ¹³and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed. [NKJV]*

Third, we have been warned that the world may bring persecution because of the gospel; then I do not want to be among those, who

Matthew 13:21 *"..... have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away." [NIV]*

Rather among those who remember the teaching:

James 1:3-4 *knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. ⁴And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. [NASB]*

Finally, the Lord may be using my suffering and my reaction or my bearing of it as an example: a means to reach and speak to someone else.

In this regard, I may remember the example of Elijah, who was persecuted by Queen Jezebel and driven into suicidal despair:

1 Kings 19:4 *But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers. [KJV]*

Elijah's temptation and test of faith was a case of fear that God would abandon and not save him from a potential deadly event, because of the murderous fury of the powerful, evil queen.

God did not answer Elijah's prayer and He does not answer similar ones from us: Elijah's faith failed, but the Lord's mercy did not and He did not abandon Elijah in his faltering faith, but He rescued him by sending a comforting angel to provide nourishment for the body and by giving him an assignment to travel to Mount Sinai to hear about the ministry expected of him;

1 Kings 19:15-16 *The LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus, and when you have arrived, you shall anoint Hazael king over Aram; ¹⁶and Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint king over Israel; and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abelmeholah you shall anoint as prophet in your place." [NASB]*

As a result, although the queen's threat had not subsided and Elijah was therefore temporarily left in his predicament, he no longer was despairing and wishing to die; rather he was desirous to obey by going back courageously into the dangerous territory where Jezebel reigned.

The lesson from Elijah's experience was that he took his eyes off from himself and focused on the ministry the Lord had for him — a powerful one: the anointing of two kings and a prophet, his successor.

In conclusion, rather than feeling punished, I can be fully assured nothing can separate me from the love of God:

Romans 8:32, 34-35, 38-39 *He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? ³⁴who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. ³⁵Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. [NASB]*