

Midweek Message

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. (James 1:12)

I do hope that you all are doing well as we continue to work through this current pandemic. As God's people in this world we're certainly not immune to the events or crises that occur at various times but struggle, in many ways, along with the world at large. However, as we've learned in the last couple of weeks our struggle, though very difficult, is made easier through the knowledge of our living hope. Although we physically suffer along with the world around us we do so knowing that we're secure in God's grace and we can trust in Him to deliver us, protect us, provide for us, and as we learned this past Sunday, purify us through the trials of life we happen to face, especially in this pandemic. So, today I'd like to talk briefly about how these trials, even pandemics like we're facing today, originate as well as the good these tests of our faith can accomplish in us as we look to our living hope, the Lord Jesus Christ.

One of the truths we must always remember is that God has ordained everything that comes to pass and that includes our current crisis. He has a purpose that is being worked out, both in His Church as well as in the world at large. God is good and as such everything He does is good and will bring about what is good for His own glory as well as for the good of those who are His. However, the question that's often raised is whether God causes the trials that come or is it simply Satan carrying on with evil such as we're experiencing during this pandemic.

In the Old Testament there are two, what appears to be, contradictory accounts of the story in which King David numbered the people of Israel. In second Samuel, chapter 24, verse 1 we're told: *"Again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, 'Go, number Israel and Judah.'"* When we read through the story, we conclude that the real issue was one of sinful trust by King David in his own army's size instead of looking to the Lord for their security. However, in the same account, which is found in first Chronicles, chapter 21, verse 1 we're told: *"Then Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel."* Now, it's obvious from the passage that this is a retelling of the same incidence as described originally in second Samuel. So, the question is, which is it? Did God incite David or did Satan? Well, the obvious answer is both are true and let me explain how this is so.

You see, Satan is the great deceiver and destroyer of life who is active in our world today bringing about chaos and disaster as he seeks to undermine the authority and purpose of God. He hates us because He hates God and we're made in the image of God. As such the devil is always out to wreak havoc in our lives and in our world. However, even though that's true, God uses the devil's efforts to bring about His very purpose for this world and especially for His people. Do you remember the story of Job and all that he suffered at the hands of our adversary? In the first couple of chapters of the Book of Job we see a conversation that occurred between Satan and God. Satan accused God of putting a hedge around Job and blessing the works of his hands and that was the only reason why Job was so faithful to the Lord. Satan then tells God that if God were to strike him then Job would curse God. Then God tells Satan to go ahead and strike him but only so far as God limits the amount of evil the devil would be able to accomplish. There again we see, both God and Satan, involved in the testing of Job. However, the difference is that God intended it for good while Satan intended it for evil. God was out to reveal Job's devotion to the Lord while Satan was trying to destroy Job's faith and trust in the Lord.

I believe one of the great truths we must remember as we continue through the trial of this pandemic is that God does everything for His own glory as well as for the good of His people. God's purpose in this life is to bring His people out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of light. He then works to purify us, transforming us, molding us into the very image of His Son and our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. As such, when Satan is allowed to bring pestilence and chaos, wars and famine, we know that God is behind it all so that we, His people, will be grown and moved toward maturity in our relationship to the Lord. If you remember from Sunday, the Apostle Peter in his first letter, chapter 1, verses 6 and 7 told us:

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

You see, trials come by God to mature us even though Satan is working to destroy us. I've often wondered why the devil hasn't figured this out because he keeps trying to destroy us and the more he tries the greater and stronger we become as God's grace proves that it's always sufficient for every trial we face. Satan tried to destroy Jesus, both in temptation, and then finally in the cross, and yet that worked for God's purpose to bring about our salvation. Satan tried to stop the Apostle Paul by inflicting him with a "thorn in the flesh" but as God reminded him: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9 ESV). Sure, there may be times when it appears the devil gets the upper hand, especially if he can cause us to momentarily take our eyes off of our Lord and we begin to fear and doubt in the faithfulness of God. However, as God's people, that's only momentary as God will always come to our rescue, forgiving us of our temporary failure, and restoring us fully to Himself in Whom we experience the grace to go on and the power to grow. Perhaps that's why James, the half brother of Jesus, begins his letter in chapter 1, verses 2-4 with these words:

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Listen, God is doing a wonderful work of grace in our lives through this current trial we're facing. His purpose is to produce steadfastness in us that makes us perfect before Him and fully complete in Him. He's growing us to the point where our faith and trust in Him is as it should be and perhaps He's preparing us for all that we'll face in the future which will also work to grow us up and mature, becoming more and more like Jesus. As I said in Sunday's message this world is just a staging ground for eternity. The preparation we receive now will certainly help us, more greatly, enjoy the eternal life that is promised by God and guaranteed through the person and work of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

So, keep your eyes heavenward in this time of trial because God is at work in the midst of this crisis. He's working for His own glory and the good of His people, those of us who've already come to know and love Him, as well as those who will come to Him through our current crisis. May God be praised, and all His people blessed.

Pastor Mark