

Fil-Am Community Church
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1 Peter 4:13-13, 19

GOD'S PURPOSE FOR MY PROBLEMS

Good morning! After a one-week break, we're continuing in our series "Where Do I Go From Here?" We're looking at how to know God's will for my life. We said that knowing God's will is not a formula but it is fellowship with God. The more you know God, the more you know what he wants for your life. Then, we also said that knowing God involves going deep into the Bible, his word, in order to become familiar with what he says about many issues in life. Today, we're going to look at what God says about the purpose of problems in your life. This message is for everyone of you who has a problem. Do you have any problems? If you don't, you're not alive.

1 Peter 4:12-13, 19, *"Dear friends. Do not be surprised at the painful trials you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed...So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good."*

Peter says that sometimes problems are God's will. Many times when we have problems, suffering, difficulties, we think that God is punishing us, that God is mad, that we must be out of God's will because nothing is going right. The fact is, the Bible teaches that there are lessons to learn as we go through suffering that God allows in our lives. I'm not here to explain suffering because there are a lot of different reasons for it. But I want us to look at five reasons why God allows you to go through sufferings or difficulties.

1. GOD OFTEN USES PROBLEMS TO DIRECT US.

Sometimes it takes a painful experience to make us change our ways. Do you agree with that? That's the thought contained in Proverbs 20:30 (NIV). It says, "*Blows and wounds scrub away evil, and beatings purge the inmost being.*" It's saying that sometimes we learn our lesson the hard way. Like a little child who is tempted to steal from his mother's purse but doesn't do it because he remembers the spanking he got when he was caught the first time.

You see, God uses problems to motivate us. Sometimes we're a little complacent, we don't want to change and He has to light a fire under us. It makes things uneasy. We get uncomfortable. C. S. Lewis said, "*God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.*" There's no doubt about it, when you're hurting God has your attention. God uses problems to direct us, to say, "I want your attention. You're going the wrong way."

The clearest evidence of that is a man named Jonah. Jonah is a clear example of a problem pointing you in the right direction. He was going to Tarshish, heading east. God said, "No, wrong way, Jonah." God sent a great fish that swallowed Jonah up and headed him back the other way. Sometimes a problem swallows you up. But when it spits you out you're in the right place. The fact is, we rarely change until we get desperate. God uses problems to prod us and to push us and to prompt us. He uses them as a catalyst to motivate us to go in the right direction. So, many times God uses problems to direct us. Also,

2. GOD OFTEN USES PROBLEMS TO TEST US.

Deuteronomy 8:2 "*The Lord God led you all the way in the desert these forty years to test you in order to know what was in your heart.*" The Bible says that God let the children of Israel wander around in the desert for forty years and He gave them several different tests and every single test they failed. So He'd say,

"Ok, one more lap around the desert!" They spent forty years dying in the desert while God was testing them and they failed every test.

You see, problems reveal what's inside of us. It's like when you squeeze a toothpaste tube, toothpaste comes out. When you squeeze a lemon, lemon juice comes out. When you are in the squeeze, whatever is inside comes out. Somebody said, "Christians are like tea bags. You don't know what's inside of them until you plop them in hot water." When you get under pressure it really reveals to you what you are. And I'd like to emphasize TO YOU. Because God already knows what you are, what you are made of, what's inside of you. He tests you for your own benefit. So that you may know who or what you really are.

The classic example of this is Job. The Bible says that God allowed Satan to test Job to prove a point. Satan said, "Job just serves you because he's wealthy." Job was the wealthiest man in the world. God said, "No, he serves Me because he's faithful. If you want to, test him. Try him out." Job, at the end of his life says, Job 23:10 (NLT), "*But he knows where I am going. And when he tests me, I will come out as pure as gold.*" God knew right in the beginning that Job is faithful. In the end, Job also came to know that he was faithful.

Problems in the Bible are often compared to the refining process of precious metal – gold or silver. We're in the refiner's fire. You see, the way you purify metal is you turn up the heat and it burns off the dross. It burns off the impurities. It purifies it. Problems can purify our lives. They can burn off the things that don't count. Somebody asked a silversmith one time, "How do you know when the silver is pure?" He said, "When I can see my reflection in it." When God can see His reflection in you, He knows you have been refined. Like steel, people are stronger when they are tested.

So what about that problem you've got in your life right now? God may use it to direct you, to change you. Maybe, he's testing you. He wants you to see what's really inside. So that you can change.

The third point is that

3. GOD USES PROBLEMS TO CORRECT US.

Life is a school and problems are the curriculum. You're never going to have a life without problems because that's part of life. Why is it that some lessons we only learn through failure? I don't know. Every child is told as a young child, "Don't touch the stove, because it's hot." Yet every child in the history of the world has had to get his finger burned at least once. Some things we only learn through failure.

Many times we bring problems on ourselves. David says, "*It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.*" (Psalm 119:71) He wrote that after he had committed adultery with Bathsheba. And as a result of that problem, David brought all kinds of grief on his life – rebellion among his children, problems in the kingdom, all kinds of things happened as a result of that relationship, and it was his fault. He brought it on himself. But the Bible says that even problems that we bring on ourselves God can use to change us.

Problems are an education. If that's true, many of you are highly educated because you have a lot of problems. Or maybe you are a repeater, because the same problem keeps coming back. You never learn. In any case, God uses them in your life to change you.

Now, if God wants to use problems as an education, how do you respond? Whenever you have a problem in your life, don't ask Why? ask What? Don't say, "Lord, why? Why is this happening?" There may be many reasons why it is happening. Maybe you're an innocent bystander. Maybe it's because you brought it

on yourself. Maybe it's part of the fact that there's sin in the world. Maybe the devil is hassling you.

I don't really care why, and I don't think God cares so much either the "Why?" of problems as much as He wants you to learn the "What?" of problems. So, the right question is "Lord, what do You want to teach me? What do You want me to learn?" Every problem can be a teaching tool. It's a stepping stone or it's a stumbling block. God may want to teach you about Himself, about His power, about His wisdom, about His grace, about the fact that He cares about everything in your life. Or God may want to teach you about you, about a weakness that you don't want to recognize, about a blind spot that you have.

The fact is we're never willing to face the future and we're never willing to face ourselves until we're forced to. We don't like to face ourselves. Why is it that it seems like everything has to go wrong and then we're motivated. We wait until things become of crisis proportion. Then we get some help. We wait until the problem is so bad. So many people come to counseling when it's too late; they should have started months earlier. God uses problems to correct us.

Hebrews 12:7-8, *"Endure hardship as discipline. God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you're not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons."* The Bible says that if you're really a Christian and you're blowing it in some area, God will correct you. If you are not corrected, God says you better check out whether you're a child of God or not. One of the tests that you know you're a believer is that when you don't follow God's will, bad things happen. The Bible says God doesn't discipline those who aren't His children. I don't spank the kids down the street when they mess up. But when my kids mess up, do I take care of them? Yes. God doesn't worry about the people who are unbelievers. That's why they get away with a lot of stuff.

But God says if you're really His child, He will correct you. Many times we reap what we sow. God uses problems to correct us, to direct us, to test us.

4. GOD USES PROBLEMS TO PROTECT US.

He protects me with problems. 1 Peter 3:17 *"It is better if it is God's will to suffer for doing good than to do evil."* It's safer to do what's right and honest and suffer for it than to compromise your integrity, because it protects you.

For instance, let's say you're working in an unethical business and your boss says "I want you to do something you know is dishonest." You know it's wrong and you don't want to do it. So you go to your boss and say, "I can't be a part of this practice. It's unethical. It's not legitimate." As a result of that, you get fired. The Bible says you're suffering for doing good. And that's exactly what's happening. But it may be a protection. You never know, the guy may be digging his own grave. He may cheat a person once too often and all of a sudden he's involved in a lawsuit and everybody's thrown in jail and you were saved because you got out early.

God often uses a problem as a blessing in disguise to protect us from something much worse. It prevents us from getting involved in something harmful. Maybe you did get fired but maybe it's the best thing that could have happened to you. It gets you out of that situation. It kept you out of the real problem.

A good example of that in the Bible is Joseph. Remember back in the Old Testament, Joseph suffered for the exact opposite reason than King David. King David suffered because he gave in to the temptation and committed adultery. Joseph suffered because he didn't give into the temptation to commit adultery. He was sold by his brothers as a slave in Egypt. While he was there, he was a servant to Potiphar. Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him one day. Joseph said, "I'm not going to do that. It's not right."

So she was rejected and because she was rejected and scorned, she started crying rape. Potiphar came home and had to believe his wife and throw Joseph in prison. He was innocent. He suffered for doing God's will.

There are some people going around today saying, "God's will is that everybody be millionaires and always be healthy, never have any sickness, never have any problems." I don't know how they handle verses like this that says sometimes we suffer according to the will of God. It's very clear, very plain, that God can even use those situations in our lives.

But the fact is, Joseph was there in the prison. As a result of that, because he happened to be there at the right place, at the right time, he was raised up eventually to become second in command in Egypt and saved an entire nation. God protected him with a problem.

Often problems are just preparation for eventual success. Joseph at the end of his life says in Genesis 50:20 talking to his brothers, *"You meant it to harm me, but God meant it for good."*

There are some people in your life that will try to harm you, they'll try to bring problems in your life and they mean it for bad, but God will use it for good in your life. How can problems be part of the will of God? To protect us, to correct us, to test, to direct us.

5. MOST OF ALL GOD USES PROBLEMS TO PERFECT US.

Paul says in Romans 8:28-29 (NKJV) *"All things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren."* v. 29 says how He uses things for good: to make us like Christ, to mold us into the image of Jesus, to build character in our lives. You and I are like uncut diamonds.

We have some rough edges on us. We have some dull spots that need to be polished. God uses problems and trials and difficulties in our lives to cut off the rough edges, to smooth us down, to polish us up so that we become a beautiful gem reflecting His glory, reflecting the light of the Lord, of much greater value than before.

What is God's number one purpose in your life? It's not to make you happy. Happiness is a by-product of His number one purpose. God's number one purpose in your life is to change your character, to make you like Himself. The Bible says in Genesis 1, God created man in His own image; only, man blew it and he went another way and the image was marred and broken and damaged so God, today, is restoring that image. He wants to make you like Christ. What was Jesus like? He was loving, patient, good, a person of integrity, faithful. He had self-control. All of those kinds of things, God wants to build in your life. So God's number one purpose is to make you like Christ and His character.

How does God do that? God does it in two ways. The first way God makes you like Christ is through the Bible, through his Word. John 17:17 says that we are made like Christ through the Word. As you read the Bible, go to Bible studies, listen to tapes, listen to Christian radio, go to your home group and look at the Word of God, it changes you. It changes the way you think and we are transformed by the renewing of our mind.

The other way that God changes you is through circumstances, through problems, through trials, difficulties, situations, heartbreaks. God uses those in your life. James 1 talks about the kind of attitude we ought to have toward our problems. It's quite an unusual attitude. *“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”* (James 1:2-4) God wants you

to be mature. He wants you to be complete. He wants you to be not lacking anything. How do you get it all together? Through your problems.

The Bible says in Hebrews 2:10 "*Jesus was made perfect through suffering.*" Perfect means mature. How do you think you're made perfect? God uses problems to perfect us, to teach us, to help us grow, to work in our lives. So He uses his word and circumstances to mature us, to perfect us in our character.

Sometimes things seem a little hectic. I have a story for those of you who think you have about all you can handle. This is so incredible but it is a true story, straight from the Encyclopedia Britannica yearbook of 1982.

"Brian Hise had more than his share of bad luck in July and it was really bad. When his apartment in Provo, Utah became flooded from a broken pipe in an upstairs apartment the manager told him to go out and rent a water vacuum. That's when he discovered his car had a flat tire. He changed it, went inside to phone a friend for help. The electric shock that he got from the phone so startled him that he inadvertently ripped the instrument off the wall. Before he could leave the apartment a second time, a neighbor had to kick the apartment door down because the water had damaged it and it was tight. While all of this was going on, somebody stole Hise's car. But it was out of gas so he found the car a few blocks away and had to push it to a gas station. That evening, Hise attended the military ceremony of Brigham-Young University. He injured himself severely when he somehow sat on his bayonet which had been tossed in the front seat of his car. Doctors were able to stitch up the wound but no one was able to resuscitate Hise's canaries that were crushed to death when wet ceiling plaster in his apartment fell on them while he was gone.

After Hise got home he slipped on the wet carpet and badly injured his tailbone. He said, " I wonder if God wanted me dead but just kept missing."

Maybe you feel that way and can't handle it, "I've got too much! Too many problems!" Truth is, God wants to use them in your life.

The apostle Paul had a problem that he never did lose. He carried it with him his entire life. That's got to be the hardest kind of problem to deal with. Paul called it a thorn in the flesh. Paul said, "I've had so many great experiences with God it'd be easy to get on an ego trip about it. I've had visions. I've had dreams. God's spoken to me." He said he prayed that the Lord take it away but the Lord didn't but gave him this assurance: "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*" 2 Cor. 12:9 Paul was saying, "When I have to depend on myself then I'm really weak. But when I know I'm weak then I depend on God and that makes me strong".

Now, let's get practical. Some of you are going through some problems right now that are really tough. When you're going through a problem, remember these four truths:

1. God sees everything I'm going through. That's the starting point. We have a tendency to forget that. We think, "God, I don't think You know that the house payment is due in three days.... God, I don't think You know that it's not easy to get a new job... God, I don't think You know that I've put up with this bad marriage for a long time... God, I don't think You know and understand the frustration I feel right now..." He does.

2. Regardless of the cause of your problem, God can use it in your life. Too often we spend too much time trying to figure out the 'Why?' of our problems. But regardless of what caused the problem, God can use that for good in your life.

3. He can change the situation. He can heal an illness. He can turn a marriage around. He can reverse a bankruptcy. He can do anything. Then why isn't He doing it? You've been praying for a long time, why hasn't He changed it? That's why you need to remember number four.

4. God wants to change me first. God sees your problem. He knows what's going on. He could change it in an instant. But He waits to change it because He wants to change you first. God is much more interested in you than He is interested in your problem. God is much more interested in how you respond to life than He is in making it easy for you. God is much more interested in your character than He is in making everything cool. So He wants to change you first. Instead of saying, "Lord, change the situation.... Lord, change my wife" say "Lord, change me!" Once you have been changed, you watch for a miracle. All it takes is an understanding that there's a purpose in your problems.