

ELEVEN

Walking

*When through fiery trials thy pathways shall lie,
My grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply;
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.*

John Rippon, "How Firm a Foundation"

We have looked at how to prepare for suffering. It is time to ask: How can we actually, practically, face and get through the suffering that has come upon us?

Most books and resources for sufferers today no longer talk about enduring affliction but instead use a vocabulary drawn from business and psychology to enable people to manage, reduce, and cope with stress, strain, or trauma. Sufferers are counseled to avoid negative thoughts; to buffer themselves with time off, exercise, and supportive relationships; to problem solve; and to "learn to accept things we can't change." But all the focus is on controlling your immediate emotional responses and environment. For centuries, however, Christianity has gone both higher and deeper in order to furnish believers with the resources to face tribulation.

Walking with God in Suffering

A famous hymn speaks of Jesus "treading" through the same griefs and troubles that we walk through.

WALKING WITH GOD THROUGH PAIN AND SUFFERING

*Crown Him the Son of God, before the worlds began,
And ye who tread where He hath trod, crown Him the Son of Man;
Who every grief hath known that wrings the human breast,
And takes and bears them for His own, that all in Him may rest.³³⁴*

As we have observed, one of the main metaphors that the Bible gives us for facing affliction is *walking*—walking through something difficult, perilous, and potentially fatal. Sometimes it is characterized as walking in darkness. “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me” (Ps 23:4 NIV; cf. Isa 50:10, 59:9; Lam 3:2). Another image is that of passing through deep waters. “I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold. I have come into the deep waters” (Ps 69:2; cf. Ps 69:15; 88:17; 124:4; Job 22:11; Ex 15:19). There is also the hint of walking carefully on slippery and dangerous mountain paths (Ps 73:2). What ties all these metaphors together is the insistence that suffering is something that must be walked through.

The walking metaphor points to the idea of progress. Many ancients saw adversity as merely something to withstand and endure without flinching, or even feeling, until it goes away. Modern Western people see suffering as something like adverse weather, something you avoid or insulate yourself from until it passes by. The unusual balance of the Christian faith is seen in the metaphor of walking—through darkness, swirling waters, or fire. We are not to lose our footing and just let the suffering have its way with us. But we are also not to think we can somehow avoid it or be completely impervious to it either. We are to meet and move through suffering without shock and surprise, without denial of our sorrow and weakness, without resentment or paralyzing fear, yet also without acquiescence or capitulation, without surrender or despair.

Let's consider particularly the metaphor of walking through fire. Fire, of course, destroys and can deliver an agonizing death. It was a very common image for adversity and judgment in Jewish, Greek, and Roman literature.³³⁵ Also in many passages in the Bible, affliction is likened to fire (Ps 66:10; Prov 17:3, 27:21; Zech 13:9; Mal 3:3). It is not surprising, then, that adversity and sorrow in general came to be characterized

Walking

as being plunged into the fire (Job 18:14–16; Ps 66:12). The most famous of all biblical passages that uses this symbol is Isaiah 43, in which God himself speaks to his people, saying,

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. . . . Do not be afraid, for I am with you (Isa 43:2–3, 5).

Floods and fire are “terms of extreme hardship.”³³⁶ And notice that, just as in the famous Psalm 23, there is no promise to believers of exemption from trouble. God does not say, “If you go through the fire” and flood and dark valleys but *when* you go. The promise is not that he will remove us from the experience of suffering. No, the promise is that God will be with us, walking beside us in it. Isaiah takes the metaphor one step further and says that, while God’s people will experience the heat, it will not “set them ablaze.” That seems to mean that while they will be in the heat, the heat will not be in *them*. That is, it won’t enter and poison their souls, harden their hearts, or bring them to despair.

1 Peter speaks of suffering, proportionately, more than any other book in the Bible.³³⁷ The apostle Peter has Isaiah 43 in mind when he tells his readers that suffering is like a refiner’s fire, like a forge or furnace. Peter is speaking to people who are facing suffering. He says they are now in a period in which they are “suffering grief in all kinds of trials” (v. 6). The Greek word for “trials” is a word that means “an attempt to learn the nature or character of something. A test.”³³⁸ “Their . . . faith was being slandered and maligned. Their social status, family relationships, and possibly even their livelihood were threatened.”³³⁹ This is the fire of which Peter speaks, but he extends the metaphor and depicts suffering not just as fire but as a forge or furnace, which can obliterate or improve, depending on the object thrust into the fire and the manner in which it is treated. So Peter adds,

WALKING WITH GOD THROUGH PAIN AND SUFFERING

Trials . . . have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed (1 Pet 1:7).

We looked at this image briefly in the Introduction—adversity is like a fire that, rather than destroying you, can refine, strengthen, and beautify you, as a forge does with metal ore. How does it do that? How can it do that?

Gold is a precious metal, and if you put it through fire it may soften or melt but it will not kindle and go to ashes.³⁴⁰ However, gold can be filled with impurities that indeed can be destroyed. If put through the fire they burn off or rise to the surface to be skimmed off by the goldsmith. In a sense, the fire “tries” to destroy the metal put into the fire but only succeeds in making it more pure and beautiful.

Now Peter likens Christians with saving faith in Jesus Christ to gold filled with impurities. Mixed in with our faith in God are all sorts of competing commitments to comfort, power, pride, pleasure, and self. Our faith is largely abstract and intellectual and not very heartfelt. We may believe cognitively that we are sinners saved by God’s grace, but our hearts actually function on the premise that we are doing well because we are more decent or open-minded or hardworking or loving or sophisticated than others. We have many blemishes in our character. We are too fragile under criticism or too harsh in giving it. We are bad listeners, or ungenerous to people we think foolish, or too impulsive, or too timid and cowardly, or too controlling, or unreliable. But we are largely blind to these things, even though they darken our own lives and harm other people.

Then suffering comes along. Timidity and cowardice, selfishness and self-pity, tendencies toward bitterness and dishonesty—all of these “impurities” of soul are revealed and drawn out by trials and suffering just as a furnace draws the impurities out of unrefined metal ore. Finally we can see who we really are. Like fire working on gold, suffering can destroy some things within us and can purify and strengthen other things.

Or not. It depends on our response. Peter urges his readers in various

Walking

ways not to be shocked by suffering (1 Pet 4:12), not to give up hope. While suffering, they should “commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good” (1 Pet 4:19), promising that “the God of all grace . . . after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong” (1 Pet 5:10). Peter is saying that the fiery furnace does not automatically make us better. We must recognize, depend on, speak with, and believe in God while in the fire. God himself says in Isaiah 43 that he will be *with* us, walking beside us in the fire. Knowing him personally while in our affliction is the key to becoming stronger rather than weaker in it.

Three in the Furnace

This promise of Isaiah 43:2–3 became literally true in the story of three Jewish exiles in Babylon under the rule of King Nebuchadnezzar, recounted in the third chapter of the book of Daniel.³⁴¹ The account tells how the king had made an enormous golden statue and set it up in a public place. The identity of the statue is never specified, but that may have been deliberate. It could then be seen as representing the king himself, or the king’s god, or the empire itself, or all three at once. Babylon, like most of the Near East, was a religiously pluralistic society. Every city and region had its own god, and all were free to pay homage to additional gods as well. But Nebuchadnezzar demanded that whenever his musicians struck up their instruments every person bow down to the image, and “whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a fiery furnace” (Dan 3:6). The king’s purpose was clear. People were free to serve various gods or not as they chose, but the one object to which all people *had* to pay homage was the power of the state.

The story tells us that the vast majority of people willingly complied, except for three Jewish men who worked in civil service. Their Babylonian names were Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They knew that to obey the king would be a violation of their faith in the God of Israel, who revealed himself as not *a* god but *the* God of the whole world. They

WALKING WITH GOD THROUGH PAIN AND SUFFERING

refused to bow down at the appointed time, and so word reached the king. They were summoned into his presence and threatened with a swift and painful death if they did not obey.

And Nebuchadnezzar said to them, “Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? . . . If you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?” (Dan 3:14–15).

These three men found themselves in the same predicament as millions of people past and present who refused to conform their religious faith and practice to the demands of a totalitarian regime. And in many ways, the three young men also represent all people who suddenly find a painful affliction falling on them unlooked for, through no fault of their own. In response to his order, Nebuchadnezzar received a famously unconditional refusal. The three said to the king:

“We have no need to answer you in this matter. . . . Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. *But if not*, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you set up” (Dan 3:17–18 ESV).

There is an almost paradoxical balance of confidence and humility in this response. Their statement combines elements that we would consider antithetical to one another. On the one hand, they express a strong belief that God not only is able to rescue them but actually *will* rescue them (v. 17). But then we are puzzled by their next sentence, beginning “*But if not*.” If they are confident in God, why would they even admit the possibility of not being delivered?

The answer is that their confidence was actually in God, not in their limited understanding of what they thought he would do. They had

Walking

inner assurance that God would rescue them. However, they were not so arrogant as to be sure they were “reading God right.” They knew that God was under no obligation to operate according to their limited wisdom. In other words, their confidence was in God himself, not in some agenda that they wanted God to promote. They trusted in God, and that included trust that he knew better than they what should happen. So they were essentially saying this: “Even if our God does not rescue us—and that is right—we will serve him and not you. We will serve him whether he conforms to our wisdom or not. We do not defy you because we think we are going to live—we defy you because our God *is* God.”

I often hear people say, “If God is going to bless us, we must believe fervently without any doubts that God *will* bless us. We must claim our blessing with full assurance that we will get it.” But we don’t see that here, nor do we see that attitude in other places in the Bible. Think of all the greatest servants, from Abraham to Joseph to David to Jesus himself, who often prayed and did *not* get the answer they sought. If we say, “I *know* you will answer this prayer, God. You *can’t not* answer it”—then our confidence is not really in God’s wisdom but in our own. As a pastor, I have heard countless people say, “I trusted God, and I prayed so hard for X, but he never gave it to me. He let me down!” But to be more precise, their deepest faith and hope was actually set on an agenda they had devised for their lives, and God was just a means they were deploying to get to that end. At best, they were trusting in God-plus-my-plan-for-my-life. But these three men trusted in God *period*.

The “I just know he will rescue us” kind of approach may seem confident on the surface, but underneath, it is filled with anxiety and insecurity. We are scared that maybe he *won’t* answer the prayer for deliverance. But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego really believed “all the way down” to God. So they were not nervous at all. They were already spiritually fireproofed. They were ready for deliverance or death—either way, they knew God would be glorified and they would be with him. They knew God would deliver them *from* death or *through* death.

Their greatest joy was to honor God, not to use God to get what they wanted in life. And as a result, they were fearless. Nothing could overthrow them.

Four in the Furnace

When he received this defiant response, Nebuchadnezzar was filled with even greater fury. He had the fire of the furnace execution chamber fueled seven times hotter. He had the three tied up and thrown into the furnace. The flames were so hot that the heat killed the soldiers who cast them in (v. 22). But when the king looked into the fire, what he saw shook him to the roots.

Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, “Weren’t there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?” They replied, “Certainly, O king.” He said, “Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods” (Dan 3:24–25 NIV).

Instead of hearing cries of agony and seeing three bodies writhing in pain, the king saw *four* figures walking about calmly in the fire, unbound and unharmed. But it was the fourth man who caught his attention. “The fourth looks like a son of the gods.” Evidently, even through the smoke and flame, this figure appeared to be a being of enormous power. He looked in some way superhuman, divine. It is obvious that the reason the three men were walking in the fire without catching fire was because of this fourth person walking beside them. And we notice that he does not come out with the other three.

Who was it? In the Old Testament, there is a mysterious figure called simply “the angel of the Lord”—not just *an* angel but *the* angel—and later Nebuchadnezzar actually says that the Lord “sent his angel and rescued them” (v. 28). Who was this? He is not like other angels who appear elsewhere in the Bible. When he appears and speaks in the burning bush to Moses, his words are said to be God’s words; his speaking is God speaking (Ex 3:2–6). When the angel appears, he is given worship (Joshua 5:15) in a way that other angels refuse (Rev 19:10). To see this angel was to see God (Judges 13:16–22). The angel is mysterious be-

Walking

cause he seems to be God in a visual form. And indeed, Christians have understood for centuries who he was. Old Testament scholar Alec Motyer sums it all up well:

“The Angel is revealed as a merciful ‘accommodation’ or ‘condescension’ of God, whereby the Lord can be present among a sinful people when, were he to go with them himself, his presence would consume them. . . . He is that mode of deity whereby the holy God can keep company with sinners. There is only one other in the Bible who is both identical with and yet distinct from the Lord. One who, without abandoning the full essence and prerogatives of deity . . . is able to accommodate himself to the company of sinners . . . Jesus Christ.”³⁴²

And so this text looks backward and forward in powerful ways. The fiery, divine friend is a vivid commentary on Isaiah 43:3, 5—“When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames shall not set you ablaze. . . . Do not be afraid for I will be with you.” Who would have ever expected how concretely God was speaking when he said, “I will be *with* you in the fire?” Do you see the infinite lengths to which he went to be with us? When we remember that Jesus had been living in unimaginable glory and bliss for all eternity, we realize that his entire life was, for him, like walking in a furnace.

At the birth of Jesus Christ, he came to be with us in our finite, weak humanity. All of his life he was under stress, often attacked by people seeking to kill him (Luke 4:29), constantly misunderstood, rejected. But it was supremely at the end of his life, on the cross, when he truly entered our furnace. Like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, he was condemned unjustly to a painful death by a totalitarian regime.

But when it came time for Jesus to enter the furnace of affliction, there was no one to walk through that furnace beside him. He was in it all by himself. No divine personage stood beside him, for he cried out on the cross, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” “When the fire of God’s wrath burned him to the core and blazed unchecked

WALKING WITH GOD THROUGH PAIN AND SUFFERING

over him, he was entirely alone.”³⁴³ Why? Why would God be with these three Jewish exiles but not his only begotten Son? The answer is that on the cross Jesus was suffering not only with us but *for us*. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were good men, but they were still flawed human beings. David said that if anyone were to keep a record of our sins of hand and heart, no one could stand before God (Ps 130:3). These three did not then deserve the Lord’s deliverance because of the perfect purity of their lives. God could walk through the fire with them because he came to earth in Jesus Christ and went through the fire of punishment they and we all deserve. That is why he can forgive and accept those who trust in his mercy. And that is why he can be with us flawed, undeserving people in the fire.

Lessons of the Furnace

What do we learn? If you believe in Jesus and you rest in him, then suffering will relate to your character like fire relates to gold. Think of four things that we want. Do you want to know who you are, your strengths and weaknesses? Do you want to be a compassionate person who skillfully helps people who are hurting? Do you want to have such a profound trust in God that you are fortified against the disappointments of life? Do you want simply to be wise about how life goes? Those are four crucial things to have—but none of them are readily achievable without suffering. There is no way to know who you really are until you are tested. There is no way to really empathize and sympathize with other suffering people unless you have suffered yourself. There is no way to really learn how to trust in God until you are drowning.

But we also learn from this story that God is with us in the fire. That is a metaphor that means he knows what it’s like to live through the miseries of this world—he understands. It means he is near, available to be known and depended upon within the hardship. He walks with us, but the real question is—will we walk with *him*? If we have created a false God-of-my-program, then when life falls apart we will simply assume he has abandoned us and we won’t seek him.

[234]

Walking

This is important to consider, because we all know that suffering does not only refine, it can also harden and consume. Plenty of people have been broken by suffering, terribly broken. So what do you have to do in order to grow instead of being destroyed by your suffering? The answer is that you must walk with God. And what is that?

It means we must treat God *as God* and *as there*. Of course that means to speak to him, to pour out your heart to him in prayer. It means to trust him. But preeminently, it means to see with the eyes of your heart how Jesus plunged into the fire for you when he went to the cross. This is what you need to know so you will trust him, stick with him, and thus turn into purer gold in the heat. If you remember with grateful amazement that Jesus was thrown into the ultimate furnace *for you*, you can begin to sense him in your smaller furnaces *with you*.

This means remembering the gospel. He was thrown into the ultimate fire, the fire that we deserve. And that is how we are saved: If we believe in him, then none of that wrath comes to us. What if, however, you believe that God saves only those who live a very good life? If that is your belief when suffering hits, you are going to hate either God or yourself. Either you will say, “I lived a good enough life. I deserve better. God has done me wrong.” Or you will say, “Oh, I must have failed to live as I should. I am a loser.” Either way, you go into despair. A heart, then, forgetting the gospel, will be torn between anger and guilt.

If you go into the furnace without the gospel, it will not be possible to find God in there. You will be sure he has done terrible wrong or you have and you will feel all alone. Going into the fire without the gospel is the most dangerous thing anyone can do. You will be mad at God, or mad at yourself, or mad at both.

But if you say to yourself when you get thrown into the furnace, “This is my furnace. I am not being punished for my sins, because Jesus was thrown into that ultimate fire for me. And so if he went through that greatest fire steadfastly for me, I can go through this smaller furnace steadfastly for him. And I also know it means that if I trust in him, this furnace will only make me better.”

The hymn writer John Rippon gave this classic expression:

[235]

WALKING WITH GOD THROUGH PAIN AND SUFFERING

*When through the deep waters I call thee to go,
The rivers of woe shall not thee overflow;
For I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless,
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.*

*When through fiery trials thy pathways shall lie,
My grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply;
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.*

*The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose,
I will not, I will not desert to its foes;
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I'll never, no never, no never forsake.*

Ways to Walk with God

Walking with God through suffering means treating God as God and as there, as present. Walking is something nondramatic, rhythmic—it consists of steady, repeated actions you can keep up in a sustained way for a long time. God did not tell Abraham in Genesis 17:1 to “somersault before me” or even “run before me” because no one can keep such behavior up day in and day out. There are many people who think of spiritual growth as something like high diving. They say, “I am going to give my life to the Lord! I am going to change all these terrible habits, and I am really going to transform! Give me another six months, and I am going to be a new man or new woman!” That is not what a walk is. A walk is day in and day out praying; day in and day out Bible and Psalms reading; day in and day out obeying, talking to Christian friends, and going to corporate worship, committing yourself to and fully participating in the life of a church. It is rhythmic, on and on and on. To walk with God is a metaphor that symbolizes slow and steady progress.

So walking with God through suffering means that, in general, you will not experience some kind of instant deliverance from your ques-

Walking

tions, your sorrow, your fears. There can be, as we shall see, times in which you receive a surprising, inexplicable “peace that passes understanding.” There will be days in which some new insight comes to you like a ray of light in a dark room. There will certainly be progress—that is part of the metaphor of walking—but in general it will be slow and steady progress that comes only if you stick to the regular, daily activities of the walking itself. “The path of the righteous is like the [earliest] morning sun, shining ever brighter till the full light of day” (Prov 4:18).

So what are those regular, daily activities? What specific means do we use so that we maintain fellowship with God and grow stronger rather than weaker during our difficult times? Throughout the Bible, we see many different actions and ways that sufferers face their suffering. We are called to walk, to grieve and weep, to trust and pray, to think, thank, and love, and to hope. For the remainder of this book, we will explore each one of these in its own chapter.

These activities are complementary strategies, none of which can be left out, but some of which may be more important depending on which type of suffering it is, as well as on the person’s temperament and other unique circumstances. And so the several strategies or ways of dealing with suffering we will now discuss must not be seen as a set of steps, nor should we think of them as all equally important for every person. As we have said, no two paths through suffering are identical. And yet none of the things the Bible calls sufferers to do can be ignored.

Life Story: Gold

by Mary Jane

I'm sixty-two years old and a four-year-old Christian.

Two weeks ago, I was listening to the AA testimony of a woman whose suffering was beyond scary. I got that overwhelmed feeling, and suddenly was reliving what I felt when I was raped as a ten-year-old. Terror, sickening danger, paralysis. Then the speaker said

WALKING WITH GOD THROUGH PAIN AND SUFFERING

something that hit my heart and I rushed to write it down because it is my truth. It is the answer.

She said, "Our suffering is our gold," and with that I understood what Jesus was doing with my suffering.

There was a rush of something outside me; powerful, complete, holding me up as I relived the old terror. As if he wanted me to stay right there and not be distracted. I get it—I am not the Lamb. He is, and always has been, for me. Although listening to that testimony feels raw, He holds me safe, even strong. His own suffering is mixed up with his God-size love.

I buried that rape deep inside. I learned how things work: Don't ask for help, it won't come. Keep quiet. You don't deserve rescuing. Be vigilant—life is unsafe.

In college I was in an abusive relationship. The man punished me because I was "guilty" of a great "betrayal"—I was not a virgin. Eventually, I tried suicide. By God's grace, I was found and spent two weeks in the hospital. When I came out, I was raped on the same day by two men—the abusive ex-boyfriend and the medical student intern in that psychiatric ward.

Again, the lesson: Don't expect help. It won't come. You don't deserve rescuing.

The middle part of my life—age twenty-five through fifty-nine—could have these chapters: "Fun," "Fun with Problems," and "Just Problems."

"Fun" was getting married, living in four European capitals, having cute kids, adventures, chasing careers, hobnobbing, learning all those languages.

"Fun with Problems": Without a career to justify me, who was I? I needed a perfect me and a perfect life. Instead, there was pesky depression, loneliness, neediness. People just wouldn't behave! Friends who were not perfect, an inappropriate father-in-law, an angry mother-in-law, "difficult" school administrators who didn't understand.

"Just Problems": Back in the USA, over the next twelve years, our teen and young-adult children faced bullying, addictions, eat-

[238]

Walking

ing disorders, brushes with the law, and finally, brushes with death. Despite therapy, yoga, Zen, and Al-Anon. It was crushing to be confronted with this fact: Not only had I not helped them, but I had been a part of their biggest problems. I learned something from Al-Anon, but it felt humiliating: "I can't help them; God can; and I will let Him."

Indeed, God did help. My atheist son, like a thunderbolt out of a blue sky, became a Christian. This son, whom I so loved, appeared to be a new person; he was asking how he could pray for us—as he deployed to Afghanistan with his special ops rescue unit. Yet we were suffering. We had seen his life dangle by a thread. There was a rawness in our hearts that defied words.

God's mission of salvation is the biggest, loudest thing in the room. He has taken ownership of me. I see how the fierceness of suffering turns into something like God's fierce love. As if he is saying, "You are mine now. Now you are free to love me as deeply as you used to fear. Now you really know what the point is—to love me and serve me in my mission of salvation—with the strength I have now given you." I know in my own heart that Jesus' power is in fact with me wherever I am. All I had to do was turn toward him, to trust him all the way with my suffering, and he does the rest. Our suffering becomes his gold. "Nothing shall hurt you" (Luke 10:19).

So He was always there with me.

God is moving powerfully to strip me of my self-centeredness. It is that refiner's fire Isaiah wrote about. It's fierce. If I can just remember every day to turn to him, entrust my whole life, he will do all the rest.

[239]