



Thinking Things Through

The Right Mindset

tired. It's the dark depths of winter and it's cold, wet and miserable and it seems like the sun won't ever shine into our lives again. And then the car breaks down at a very inconvenient moment. And then we have a rant and/or a pity party. I know that I have.

I would accept intellectually that any problems that I have to deal with are small beer compared to the difficulties that other people face in their lives, but that isn't what I'm thinking at the time. At the time I find myself lapsing into a mindset whereby I'm wondering what I did to deserve this and trying to interpret these chastening events as divine punishment.

When things are going swimmingly I automatically seem to think that God is in His heaven and all is well with the world and that He is happy with me. But when things go awry, I assume that it is because He is angry with me. In tough times I seem to find it hard to trust in the good plan that a loving God has set out for me. I feel like I am being punished by an angry parent. I wonder if I have committed, but not confessed, some heinous, hidden sin and now I'm taking the rap for it.

When I look into the Bible I learn that this is not the case. Yes, Jesus did tell us that "In this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33) but I think that when I'm suffering the natural man in me responds by asking if God has visited these troubles on me because He is angry.

Perhaps the central mistake that I have been making in situations such as these is in mixing up punishment and discipline? And they are not the same thing.

Punishment is what happens to you when you haven't paid your TV licence and you find yourself in court being fined. It's about retribution rather than correction. It is about the administration of justice in response to the crime that you have committed.

Discipline on the other hand can be thought of as training, which in time will help to develop your character, abilities and self-control. While punishment

Do you ever find yourself thinking in a somewhat less than Christian way? I think that I do from time to time. Even as a Christian I can find myself lapsing into old mindsets and thinking in ways that I know to be wrong. Well, I know afterwards.

We've all had the experience of a number of things going wrong in our lives all at the same time. We've got a heavy cold and are quite literally sick and

looks back to your crime, discipline looks forward to the benefit that will accrue to you in your life.

But to a person like me (who can lose-the-run-of-himself sometimes) punishment and discipline can feel like the same thing. When a person is feeling pain and discomfort and they're not thinking straight, it can be hard to differentiate between the two.

We know that God does not deal with His children on the basis of punishment. We know that all of God's punishment for our sins was paid for by Jesus on the cross. And that as children of God He instead deals with us on the basis of discipline, as a loving father, teaching us so that we can grow in grace.

The issue of trusting God when times get tough is addressed in Hebrews 12: 1-11. We are exhorted to "endure hardships as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?"

The author of Hebrews is thought to have written in order to encourage the Jewish Christians who were facing persecution and perhaps wavering in their faith. He cites examples of many people in Biblical history who had put their faith in God when under considerable duress. There were those:

"Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouth of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens." (Hebrews 11:33-35)

This is very heroic stuff and we might all (in theory anyway) like to live and die as examples of heroes of the faith. But not all Christians experience that bittersweet ending. For some, the reality was having their lives come to a less obviously heroic ending:

"Women received their dead raised to life again: and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection: And others had a trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea moreover of bonds and imprisonment: They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword; they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth." (Hebrews 11:35-38)

Some of the faithful were victorious in battle and some were killed; however, "these were all commended for their faith." (Hebrews 11: 39) So having looked at this matter, albeit briefly, I conclude this: I really have no excuse for looking upon my personal, small trials as being evidence of God's displeasure. And I can see the truth about serious tribulations occurring in the lives of Christians. James wrote, "My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptation." (James 1:2)

And Paul also had something to say about such disciplining and explained the reason why it occurred:

“...but we glory in tribulations also; knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope. And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.” (Romans 5:3-5)

It is a fact of our Christian lives that we will all face trouble because we live in this fallen world. There is no exemption promised to us, but God does promise that He will go through it with us. When we are suffering we have to bear in mind that He promised this: “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)

We know that if we go off-piste in our Christian lives that He will lovingly apply corrective discipline to bring us back to where we should be. He also promises us that His peace and joy is available to us in the midst of our troubles through placing our trust in Him in an attitude of thanksgiving. And He also promises us that nothing that happens to us is a sign of His rejection.

We can perhaps adopt the following mindset in times of trouble: “Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.” (Philippians 1:6)

We do not know what will happen to us when we awaken tomorrow: pleasurable or painful. But we do know that the same Christ who loves us perfectly today is already there.