

Walking¹

Walking with God in Suffering

One of the primary metaphors the Bible gives for facing affliction is *walking*, walking through something difficult, perilous or even fatal. Some examples include:

- walking in darkness (“even though I walk through the darkest valley...” Ps. 23:4, see Is 50:10, 59:9, Lam 3:2)
- passing through deep waters (Ps 69:2 69:15; 88:17; 124:4; Job 22:11; Ex 15:19)
- walking on slippery or dangerous mountain paths (Ps. 73:2)
- walking through fire (Ps 66:10; Prov. 17:3, 27:21; Zech. 13:9, Mal. 3:3, Job 18:14-16; Ps. 66:12)

Walking points to progress. Many of the ancients (e.g. Stoics) saw affliction as something to be endured without flinching or feeling until it goes away. Many modern Western people see suffering as something like bad weather, something you avoid or insulate yourself from. The Bible teaches us to face affliction with a unique balance. We are not to just let suffering have its way with us, nor are we to think that somehow we can avoid it. We are to meet and move through suffering without shock or surprise, without denial of our sorrow and weakness, without resentment or paralyzing fear, yet also without acquiescence or capitulation, without surrender or despair.

Fire is a common image for adversity and judgment in ancient literature. Is. 43 is a well-known passage that illustrates this:

²When you go through deep waters, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown. When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you. ³For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.... ⁵“Do not be afraid, for I am with you. I will gather you and your children from east and west. (NLT)

Note that there is no promise of exemption from trouble for believers, it is not *if*, but *when*. The promise is that God will be with us, walking beside us in it. Isaiah states that while believers will experience heat, it will not “burn them up.” They will be in the heat but the heat will not be in them. That is, affliction won’t enter and poison their souls, harden their hearts or bring them to despair.

1 Peter speaks more about suffering, proportionately, than any other book in the Bible. He states that believers will experience “all kinds of trials” (1:6). The Greek word for trial means “an attempt to learn the nature or character of something,” a test. Peter talks about fire 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. Adversity is like a fire that, rather than destroying you, can refine, strengthen and beautify you. How? When gold that is mixed with impurities is fired, the impurities rise to the top. In a sense, the fire “tries” to destroy the metal put in the furnace but only succeeds in making it more pure and beautiful.

Mixed in with our faith in God are many competing commitments; commitments to comfort, power, pride, pleasure and self. Our faith may be primarily abstract and intellectual. We have many defects in our character but we are largely blind to these things. Then suffering comes along. Timidity and cowardice, selfishness and self-pity, tendencies toward bitterness and dishonesty are drawn out by suffering. Like fire working on gold, suffering can destroy some things in us and purify and strengthen other things.

But it depends on our response. Peter urges his readers not to be shocked by suffering (4:12), not to give up hope, commit themselves to God and do good(4:19). Peter is saying that the fiery furnace will not automatically make you better. You must recognize, depend on, speak with and believe in God while in the fire. Peter promises that “the God of all grace . . . after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong” (5:10).

¹ Material taken/quoted from Tim Keller, *Walking with God through pain and suffering*, chapter 11.

Three in the Furnace

The story of the three Hebrew men in Daniel 3 teaches a great deal about fire and afflictions. These three men found themselves in the same predicament as millions of people past and present who refuse to conform their religious faith and practice to the demands of a totalitarian regime. They represent all people who suddenly find a painful affliction falling on them unlooked for, through no fault of their own. Their response when challenged is truly amazing:

¹⁶King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. ¹⁷If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. ¹⁸But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up. (NIV)

Their response is an almost paradoxical balance of *confidence* and *humility*. On the one hand they express a strong belief that God is able to rescue them and actually will rescue them. But, puzzlingly, they add, "but even if he does not." If they are so confident in God's ability to rescue them, why admit to the possibility of not being delivered?

The answer is that their confidence was in God, not in their limited understanding of what they thought he would do. While they believed God would rescue them, 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. I.e., their agenda was in God himself, not in some agenda that they wanted God to promote. Their trust in God included a trust that he knew better than they what should happen. They were saying, "We will serve him whether he conforms to our wisdom or not."

Many today trust God to answer their prayers according to their personal agenda. They pray with "faith." "I just *know* God will rescue me." Their deepest faith and hope is actually set on an agenda they had devised for their lives and God is just a means they were deploying to get that end. On the surface, this type of prayer may seem full of faith and confidence in God, but underneath it is filled with anxiety and insecurity, fearful that God won't deliver. The three Hebrews believed *in God*. They were ready for deliverance or death; either way God would be glorified. 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

God stood with them in the furnace. Many interpreters believe this to be a theophany, that the 4th man in the furnace was a representation of God in a visual form. God was actually present in the fire with the Hebrew men.

Jesus goes beyond just being in the fire with us. He left heaven, became man and entered the furnace of affliction alone. On the cross Jesus was suffering not only with us but *for* us. We do not deserve deliverance from any furnace. Jesus suffered so that we can be delivered.

Lessons of the Furnace

There are important lessons for us to learn when we walk through affliction.

- **Fire reveals, purifies and refines.** Do you want to know who you are? Your strengths and weaknesses? Do you want to be a person who compassionately helps hurting people? 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? These things cannot be achieved without suffering. There is no way to know who you really are until you are tested.
- **God is in the fire.** He knows what it is like to live through the miseries of this world. He is near, available to be known and depended upon. The question is, am I trusting the false God-of-my-program or am I trusting the sovereign God who truly knows and cares for me?
- **We must walk with God as God.** To grow and not be hardened or broken by affliction, we must walk **with God** in the fire. This means we are cognizant of his grace. If we live by works when we face affliction we will either believe we have lived a good life and are thus undeserving of this affliction and get angry at God; or believe we have failed to live good enough and become overwhelmed with guilt. If you go into the fire 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. You will be mad at God, mad at yourself or mad at both. Instead when you go into the fire you will be able to say, “This is just a furnace. I am not being punished for my sins, because Jesus already bore that for me. He went through that great fire for me, I can go through this furnace with him.”

- **We Walk Through the Furnace.** Walking is something nondramatic, rhythmic. It is steady, repeated actions you keep up for a long time. Some think of spiritual growth like high diving, growing to become mature in a short period of time. While the Christian life requires certain definite actions, it depends on an ongoing commitment to regular activity: praying, reading God’s word, obeying daily, fellowshiping. It is a slow, steady process. This implies that most often deliverance from the furnace will not be instant. There will 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.