

Nothing for Our Harm

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When we first came into the Church I think all of us had a naïve faith, I know I did. We had a naïve faith that God would not allow bad things to happen to His people. We were called; we were chosen and the skids were greased into the kingdom of God and God would never allow bad things to happen to those He has chosen. But after we've been in the Church for years and decades, we realize that bad things do happen to God's people. People have been in car wrecks, airplane crashes, they've had cancer, they've had arthritis, they've had heart attacks and they have died. As a result of witnessing or experiencing that, sometimes that realization can cause fear and anxiety and a lack of mature faith. People get shook about that. In addition, all of us have been through trials within the Church since we've been called, especially in the last few years and that can cause anxiety and nervous stomachs and all of that. All of these stresses can cause sleepless nights, they can cause short tempers, irritability, they can cause health problems of all kinds, anxiety and worry and they can lead to the inability to think coherently when people are under a lot of stress, worry and anxiety.

In addition to all of that we have some people in the Church who are just natural born worriers. We have people in the Church; I've counseled with them over the years and they worry about almost everything. They worry about getting safely to the grocery store tomorrow or whether it's going to snow or this or that or the other thing. Some of them grew up in an environment where their parents were worried. They grew up in a worrisome environment and atmosphere and they followed suit and they're just in a state of anxiety all the time. They dwell on the worst possible outcome that could occur in a given situation. The light at the end of their tunnel is an oncoming train. It's not the light because the tunnel is over with or getting through the tunnel.

When we allow stress and trials to overwhelm us, sometimes we can feel there is no hope, there's no way out and over time, it gives a long-term feeling of impending doom. They're just waiting for the other shoe to drop, for something bad to happen and they're in a state of almost constant anxiety. So this can lead to a constant state of being unsettled, a constant state of being negative in their outlook.

What I'm here to tell you is there is a way to stop all that, just stop it in its tracks. If we deeply understand one point about God and our relationship with God, it will stop this fear and worry and anxiety in its tracks. It's a point that has gotten me through some very stressful times in the last several years. It's something that is extremely important that all of us are going to need and a knowledge and understanding especially as we go forward toward the end of this age and all that is going to go on in this world and this society. We can never, ever forget this principal. I'm going to state this principal and then we are going to prove it. The principal is this: Once we commit our way to God, then all that happens to us, all that He either causes or allows in our lives is only for our ultimate good and not for our harm. I will say it again. Once we commit our way to

God, all He causes or allows to happen to us is only for our good, only for our long-term benefit and not for our harm. If you want to put a title on the sermon, we'll call it, Nothing for Our Harm. We are going to see and prove that God does nothing to hurt us or harm us, but rather everything that He does is for our long-term good and benefit.

Now first we need to set the stage, set the background because what we want to do is examine our past heritage in the Church to see where it might have caused some of us to have an erroneous view of God, an erroneous view of the very nature of God.

Now early in the Church, I'm talking the 50s, the 60s and even the 70s, but particularly the 50s and the 60s, many early ministers and early members came out of a Catholic or Protestant background. The western world was a lot more religious fifty and sixty years ago than it is today. The people that were called into the Church, ministers and members came out of a background, Catholic or Protestant, that taught fire and brimstone, that taught and emphasized burning in hell. They came out of that, of course. They learned that isn't true, but they had a background of Dante's Inferno. He wrote that in the early 1300s and then if you looked into that, the wood cuttings and engravings by Gustave Dore' back in the mid 1800s showing all the horrors of Dante's Inferno. That became part of the religious package that people brought into the Church back in the 50s, 60s and 70s. As a result, the Church stressed the wrath of God on disobedient man. Remember the drawings of Basil Wolverton? I can remember the sky was black and this emaciated guy with sores and boils all over him and he was scrawny and his mouth was open, screaming in terror. There was another drawing of this giant bulldozer being driven by another emaciated guy, plowing corpses, bones and skulls into a giant pit. It all emphasized, you see, God's wrath on disobedient man.

The point I'm trying to make is that mindset carried over into the Church and the preaching and teaching in the Church because it carried over to God's wrath on His own people when we disobeyed. It was not always said, but it was part of the culture. So when something bad happened to a brother or sister in the Church, the first thing the brethren thought of was (we've all done it) "I wonder what their sin is? God is obviously punishing them for something they've done." We came to that conclusion because we naively thought that nothing bad would happen to somebody who was in a right standing with God. Therefore, they must be in a bad standing with God, therefore, He is punishing them for their sins.

That concept, you see, colored our view of God Himself. It colored our view of the nature of God to the point that many of us had (maybe it was unstated; maybe it was unconscious) a view of God that He was just waiting for us to step out of line and when we did the hammer was going to come down. Something bad was going to happen to us. We would get cancer or something. We viewed God as somehow taking pleasure in meting out retribution, meting out punishment to those who deserved it, as we all do. I can remember in my first year after baptism, I was a sales manager at a retail operation in Detroit. As I said, I was baptized less than a year. It was in the winter and sundown in Detroit was before 5 P.M. I got tied up with something and I wasn't thinking and all of a sudden I came to my senses and looked out the window and I didn't see any

long shadows. I thought, "Oh, no!" I literally ran out of the store and when I dashed out of the store and ran to where the car was on a side street, I looked to the west and I could just see a little sliver of the sun left. I went into the car and just collapsed and took this huge heave because somehow subliminally I thought that if I crossed that line, fire was going to come down from heaven; I'd get in a car wreck on the way home or the next morning I'd wake up with cancer. You just had those feelings that God was going to nail you if you stepped across this line. As a result of that, the ministry became, I think, overly harsh and some sadly indeed took pleasure in exercising harsh rule and harsh authority, because they felt that's the way God was.

Now that concept as we're going to see is horribly, horribly wrong. It is horribly incorrect. If we still have some remnants of those feelings in us, we need to get rid of them.

What we want to cover today is we're going to prove that is not the case. I want to qualify in the beginning what I say because we don't want to misunderstand. There is a day of reckoning. There is a day of judgment. Everybody is going to have to stand before God and we are going to have to be held in account for our sins. Those who refuse to obey God, refuse to have Him rule over us, refuse to follow His way of life, yes, they will be terminated forever in the lake of fire. That exception is for people who just don't want God to rule over them, which doesn't cover anybody that has been called and given God's Holy Spirit and as Les was pointing out, those who love God with all their heart.

What we're going to do is investigate three examples in the Bible, one of a nation and two of individuals; one in the Old Testament and one in the New Testament. As we do that, I want you to ask yourself as we look at these examples, is God eagerly waiting to punish them or does He somehow take pleasure in punishing them, or is God causing and allowing the trials that they faced in their life for their ultimate benefit and not for their harm?

The first example we're going to look at is Joseph. Now I covered the life of Joseph back in June from the perspective of Joseph's patience, but today we want to examine Joseph's life from the perspective that God caused or allowed things to happen to him for his good and for the greater good of many, many other people. Now, as I said before, Joseph was the only patriarch in the Bible where no sin is recorded. Now obviously he was not perfect, but it's also obvious that he was a young man who followed God from a very early age. Humanly speaking, he got punished for following God. As we say today, tongue in cheek, sometimes in Satan's world, "no good deed goes unpunished." Joseph, every time he did something good he got punished for it. It would have been very easy for Joseph to lose sight of what God was doing in the greater picture.

Now let's summarize what we covered previously. We know that Joseph was his father's favorite. That was not good and something we should not emulate. His father gave him many favors including a coat of many colors and as a result of all that, his

brothers were insanely jealous of him. They sold him into slavery, they dipped the coat into animal's blood and convinced Jacob that animals had killed Joseph. He was sold into slavery and taken down to Egypt and was sold to Potifar, the captain of the guard that guarded Pharaoh. God gave Joseph favor with Potifar to the point that he turned over his whole household, all his doings, to Joseph. He didn't know how much money he had and didn't know how the money was spent because he trusted Joseph. We also know that Potifar's wife, as we would say today, "hit" on Joseph and wanted him, as the King James says politely, to lie with her, and she kept pushing him day after day and finally he had to flee. He had to run out. As a result of that rejection; she didn't handle his rejection very well and she lied about him and said he tried to rape her. Potifar sent Joseph to jail. He didn't kill Joseph because my suspicion is (some day we will find out) that he knew his wife's character and knew that there was probably more than one side to the story. The fact is, Joseph, for doing well, for being obedient, wound up in jail.

Over time, the same thing happened to Joseph. The jailer got to the point because Joseph performed so well and helped him so much that he basically turned the jail over to Joseph. But the problem is, for doing good Joseph was not only a slave, but he was in jail. Think about how you would view God if you were in his position. Then what happened if you recall, the chief of the butlers and the chief of the bakers displeased the Pharaoh, offended him in some way and they were cast into prison. They both had dreams and Joseph correctly interpreted those dreams. The chief of the bakers had his head handed to him and he was executed. The chief of the butlers was reinstated to his previous position and Joseph begged him, "Please remember me when you get back to Pharaoh's court." Of course, he did not and as a result, Joseph spent two more years in prison for correctly interpreting a dream.

Then after those two years, Pharaoh had a dream that no one could interpret, none of the wise men. But the butler then remembered Joseph. Joseph was summoned. He correctly interpreted the dream and told Pharaoh seven years of plenty, then seven years of famine and Pharaoh then elevated him to second place in the kingdom to help them get through that trial. Pharaoh made Joseph second in command when he was thirty years old. He was sold into slavery when he was seventeen. So he spent thirteen years with one trial after another, after another, after another all the while being blameless.

Now we have to ask the question as far as Joseph's image of God and our image of God as a result of that. What did Joseph learn from all of this? What was the conclusion at the end of the day? We're going to read a scripture that is very revealing, but let's set the context for the scripture. Jacob had died in Egypt. They journeyed to Canaan to bury him. The whole family, after his burial, returned back to Egypt. Now that Dad has died, Joseph's brothers knew that Joseph could be unrestrained in what he wanted to do to them in their view and they were afraid for their lives. They were afraid now, since Jacob is dead, that he would kill them.

Let's go to Genesis, chapter 50 and see if Joseph had the same attitude as we erroneously sometimes prescribe to God saying that he was just waiting to take

retribution, just waiting to take vengeance. Notice Joseph's attitude toward his brothers, but then his attitude about looking to God and about what had happened to him. We'll begin in verse 16.

Genesis 50:16. *And they (referring to Joseph's brothers) sent a messenger unto Joseph, saying (they're back in Egypt now) "Your father did command before he died, saying*

17) 'So shall you say unto Joseph, Forgive, I pray you now, the trespass of your brothers and their sin; for they did unto you evil: and now, we pray, forgive the trespass of the servants of the God of your father.'" And Joseph (notice his attitude) he wept when they spoke unto him. (KJV)

Instead of being angry and vengeful.

18) And his brothers also went and fell down before his face; and they said, Behold we are your servants. (KJV)

They had a humble and repentant attitude because they thought their necks were on the line.

*19) And Joseph said unto them, Fear not, for [am] I in the place of God?
20) But as for you, you thought evil against me (notice his attitude; notice what he sees); [but] God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as [it is] this day, to save much people alive. (KJV)*

He saw that God had a bigger picture and that his sufferings were nothing compared to what was accomplished for good among many, many people.

21) Now therefore fear you not: I will nourish you and your little ones. And he comforted them and spoke kindly unto them.

So think about this, despite the appearances during his thirteen years of trial where every good that he did seemed to be punished; despite that, everything that happened to Joseph was for good. His immediate family was saved. His immediate family prospered. The nation of Israel was founded and prospered and saved. And at the end of the day, Joseph himself, as we've heard in many sermons over the years, became a type or forerunner of Christ as far as his example.

What we see behind all of this is that God was moving the chess pieces on the board behind the scenes in ways that Joseph didn't see, the nation of Israel didn't see, Pharaoh didn't see, Potifar didn't see, nobody saw and his brothers certainly didn't see it. It was unknown to men what God was doing, but it was all for their ultimate good, and I'm here to tell you He does the same today with each one of us. He works behind the scenes in ways we cannot imagine, we cannot even comprehend, for our good and for our benefit.

So we have to ask the question, in this case with Joseph: Is God eagerly waiting to punish or is God working to do good and no harm to the people he chooses to deal with? We need to understand the answer to that question.

Let's look at a second example. This is about the ancient nation of Judah. Let's go to Jeremiah 29. If you have a marker, we're going to read one verse and then come back to it in a minute. To set the context, we're going to start in verse 1 of Jeremiah 29. Notice what it says.

Jeremiah 29:1. *Now these [are] the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem unto the residue of the elders which were carried away captives, and to the priests, and to the prophets, and (notice this) to all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had carried away captive from Jerusalem to Babylon*

This is the letter that Jeremiah is writing to them, the leaders as well as all the people. Now, let's stop here. We're going to come back to this in just a second. Let's ask the question: Why were they taken away captive, specifically? Why were they taken away captive? Well, the Bible has the answer.

Keep your finger or marker there and let's go to 2 Kings 23 and we're going to read a couple of different verses to get the context of why they were taken away captive and the horrible, horrible things that they did.

2 Kings 23:26. *Notwithstanding ...*

What he's referring to here are the good deeds of righteous King Josiah.

*26b) ...the Lord turned not from the fierceness of his great wrath, wherewith his anger was kindled against Judah (why was His wrath kindled against Judah?) because of all the provocations that Manasseh had provoked him to do.
27) And the Lord said, I will remove Judah also out of my sight, as I have removed Israel, and will cast off this city Jerusalem which I have chosen, and the house of which I said, My name shall be there. (KJV)*

He said, "I am going to destroy the temple. I'm going to destroy this city because of the provocations of the wicked King Manasseh."

So that leads to another question: What did Manasseh do to cause God's wrath? Let's go back to chapter 21 of 2 Kings and we're going to read the first nine verses.

2 Kings 21:1. *Manasseh [was] twelve years old when he began to reign (he was just a kid), and reigned fifty and five years in Jerusalem ...*

Now think about that. How would you like a president in the United States to reign fifty-five years? That is a long time to do either good or evil, and in this case, it was evil.

2) *And he did [that which was] evil in the sight of the Eternal, after the abominations of the heathen, whom the Lord cast out before the children of Israel.*

He said he, as we're going to find out, was even worse than those heathen pagan nations that were in the promised land prior to Israel coming into the land. Let's see what they did.

3) *For he built up again the high places which Hezekiah his father had destroyed; and he reared up altars for Baal; and he made a grove, ...*

We know, and I'll say this as politely as I can, it's a phalanx symbol carved out of wood in a forest surrounded by trees where they worshipped that symbol and worshipped basically Satan.

3b) *... as did Ahab king of Israel; and worshipped all the host of heaven (the Zodiac, the stars, the demons - he worshipped all of that) and served them.*

Not just worshipped them, but served them.

4) *And he built altars (notice this) in the house of the Lord, of which the Lord said, In Jerusalem will I put my name.*

5) *And he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of God. (KJV)*

Pagan altars inside God's temple.

6) *And he made his son pass through the fire, and observed times, and used enchantments, and dealt with familiar spirits and wizards (demons and demon influenced people) he wrought much wickedness in the sight of the Eternal, to provoke [him] to anger.*

7) *And he set a graven image of the grove that he had made in the house of (God; in the very house of God) which the Lord said to David, and to Solomon his son, (God said to the two of them) "In this house and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all tribes of Israel, will I put my name for ever*

8) *Neither will I make the feet of Israel move any more out of the land which I gave their fathers; only if (He said "I'll do this only if") they will observe to do according to all that I have commanded them, and according to all the law that my servant Moses commanded them."*

If they had only done that, His name would still be there. That temple would still be there, but it isn't today because of their disobedience.

9) *But they hearkened not: and Manasseh seduced them to do more evil than did the nations whom the Lord destroyed before the children of Israel. (KJV)*

Judah reaped what they had sown and they were taken away captive and as an aside, that is happening to modern day Israel today. We are reaping what we sow. People are wringing their hands and saying, "Why, why, why?" We are reaping what we sow.

Now, given all that they did and, yes, God caused them to be carried away captive, given all they did, what do you think God's attitude to them would be? Was He just waiting to smash them, the remnant? Was He waiting because of their sins just to crush them into dirt? Notice God's attitude. Let's go back to Jeremiah 29 and begin in verse 4. We were in verse 1 earlier. Notice God's attitude.

Jeremiah 29:4. *Thus said the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, unto all that are carried away captives, whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem unto Babylon;*

This wasn't an accident. God caused it. Verse 5, notice what He says to them.

5) *Build you houses and dwell [in them]; and plant gardens, and eat the fruit of them;*

6) *Take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters (Why?) that you may be increased there and not diminished. (KJV)*

Thank about that.

7) *And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captives, and pray unto the Lord for it; for in the peace thereof shall you have peace.*

So here He is telling them a way to have peace in the city where they were taken captive.

8) *For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel (He gives them a warning); let not your prophets and your diviners, that [be] in the midst of you, deceive you, neither hearken to your dreams which you cause to be dreamed.*

9) *For they prophesy falsely unto you in my name (this is happening today also) I have not sent them, says the Lord.*

Notice verse 10.

10) *For thus says the Lord, that after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place. (KJV)*

He brought them back because of His love and His kindness to them, as Les was talking about in the sermonette. Notice this though. This is the key. Now think about the mind of God.

11) For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord (Now what are those thoughts?), thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.

Now think about that. After all they had done, all the provocations, worshipping pagan gods in the very temple of God, after all of that God says, *“My thoughts to you are of peace and not evil, to give you an expected end.”* Now what was their expected end? Yes, they came back seventy years later, but the real expected end is they’re going to have their blindness removed. They’re going to have access to God’s Holy Spirit through the blood of Jesus Christ. They will eventually have God’s very spirit and their expected end is to be in the family of God. This is far greater than the physical promises that were made to ancient Israel and to Judah in particular. This is the expected end that God has for them.

So, let’s ask the question: Does this sound like a God who just can’t wait to take retribution and to smash people that disobey and turn from Him? Ask again the question: Is God eagerly awaiting to punish or is everything that He allows or causes (in this case, caused) is everything caused for their ultimate good and for their ultimate benefit? That’s a decision each one of us has to make.

Now the third example is of the Apostle Paul; Joseph in the Old Testament and Paul in the New Testament. First we need to look at the example of Paul. We know and we won’t turn there, 1 Corinthians 1:26, we know that not many wise men, not many mighty, not many wise after the flesh, not many noble are called. We are certainly in that category. Paul was one of the few mighty that was called, one of the few.

Let’s go to Philippians 3 and we’re going to cover verses 4 through 6. We’re going to cover his background and show you how mighty Paul was. For sake of time, you could also read Acts 22, verses 3 to 5, or Galatians 1 verses 13 and 14 that add to this.

Philippians 3:4. *Though I might also have confidence in the flesh.*

Before he was converted, he certainly did.

4b) ... If any other man thinks that he has whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more:

5) Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, [of] the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee;

6) Concerning zeal, persecuting the Church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, (I am) blameless. (KJV)

He said, "I was as good a Pharisee, as good a Jew or Benjamite or Israelite as could possibly be." We also know that he studied at the feet of Gamaliel and he was wise in the scriptures. He had the background and the training and the credentials and we would say today, the resumé of somebody who was very high and mighty. Before his conversion he was very proud of what he was.

Now let's look at what Christ had to say and what Christ thought of Paul's credentials. Let's go to Matthew 3 and we'll read verses 7 through 9. In the flesh, Paul had a meticulous, almost perfect background (in the flesh). But in Matthew 3:7 Christ saw the Pharisees and the Sadducees who came to His baptism.

Matthew 3:7. *But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, "Oh, generation of vipers, who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (KJV)*

He didn't respect their credentials. He didn't respect their office.

- 8) *Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance:* (fruits that are suitable or evidence of the fact that you have repented)
- 9) *And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to [our] father (as Paul obviously thought; he was a son of Abraham): for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.*

I don't need somebody to sit at the feet of Gamaliel. I don't need somebody to be a Hebrew of Hebrews or a Pharisee to do what I want them to do. In fact, I can raise up (and in our case, probably not stones even, but bits of grits of sand) to be raised up to do His work. Obviously Christ was unimpressed with their background, and hence Paul's background. Now look at what God and Christ allowed to come Paul's way. He allowed some horrible things to come Paul's way, this man that was high and mighty in the religion of the Jews.

2 Corinthians 12:7. *And lest I should be exalted above measure ...*

Well, previously he was the favorite of the counsel and favorite of the temple because he was persecuting this new religion right and left.

7b) *...through the abundance of the revelations (remember Christ struck him and talked to him face to face; lest he would get puffed up about that), there was given to me a thorn in the flesh,*

Christ caused this to happen to Paul. If you look up the words, "thorn in the flesh," Clarke's Commentary says this: The word signifies a stake and to be tied to a stake by way of punishment. Now it's pure speculation as to what that was. Some people thought he was partially blind and didn't have his eyesight restored after he was struck blind. We don't know. We don't have a clue, but the fact is looking at the words, "thorn

in the flesh” it is not some small affliction. It’s a major affliction. Going on in the latter part of verse 7:

7c) ... the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. (KJV)

Remember he had the background and then all of a sudden Christ strikes him and talks to him personally and trains him personally. Talk about being elevated. Talk about being put in an exalted status, he said, “That’s me.”

8) For this thing (being tied to a stake as a way of punishment) I besought the Lord three times, that it might depart from me.

9) And he said unto me, “My grace is sufficient for you: for my strength is made perfect in weakness...”

He said what I have allowed or allowed Satan to do to you is for a greater purpose. Paul understood that.

9b) ... Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. (KJV)

“I have more power from Christ because I’m going to need it because of my infirmities.”

Now let’s go to 2 Corinthians, chapter 11 and see a very familiar scripture about other things that God and Christ allowed to happen to Paul after his conversion, just like they did with Joseph after he was sold into slavery and transferred down to Egypt. We’ll read through verse 28. He’s defending his apostleship and he says...

2 Corinthians 11:23. *Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) ...*

They obviously were not.

23b) ... I [am] more; in labors more abundant, (I work harder than them all) in stripes (beatings) above measure ...

“I’ve lost count of the times I was beaten.”

23c) ...in prisons more frequent, in deaths often (meaning in threats of death).

24) Of the Jews five times received I forty [stripes] save one. (KJV)

Now a person could die from 39 stripes. That had happened. The reason they limited it to that was so they wouldn’t die, but some did. Paul had that happen five times! If you read the history on that, people came away bruised and disfigured for life with 39 stripes. But to have that happen five times; obviously Paul had scars and had aches and pains and probably broken bones that maybe didn’t heal as well as they should as a result of that.

25) *Three times I was beaten with rods ...*

That still happens in the Middle East today. They beat them with canes and that can break ribs and leave horrible bruises on people.

25b) *... Once I was stoned, and three times I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep ...*

26) *[In] journeying often, [in] perils of waters, [in] perils of robbers, [in] perils by [mine] own countrymen, [in] perils by the heathen, [in] perils in the city, [in] perils in the wilderness, [in] perils in the sea, [in] perils among false brethren; (KJV)*

He was accused by false brethren.

27) *In weariness (I've been tired beyond measure) and painfulness (after all the beatings you would understand that) in watchings often (to be relieved from his suffering) in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.*

And he said besides all of that from without the Church:

28) *Beside those things that are without, that which comes upon me daily, the care of all the Churches.*

That can be a burden. He says, "I've been through all of that." and the reality is, Paul has suffered far more than most of us have suffered or probably will suffer.

But was Paul angry with God? Was Paul's image of God just this vengeful God out to punish him or Christ just out to drive him with a whip and chair? Let's turn now to Philippians 1, verses 12 through 14. Notice what Paul understood from his trials, all these horrible things that happened to him. Notice what he said.

Philippians 1:12. *But I would you should understand, brethren, that the things [which happened] unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance (the Greek can mean the advancement) of the gospel*

He said everything that God and Christ have allowed to come upon me have promoted the gospel.

13) *So that my bonds (he was in prison) in Christ are manifest in all the palace (the margin in the King James says, Caesar's court), and in all other [places];*

Everything he had been through, his imprisonment, caused Paul and Christianity to be spoken of in the very court of Caesar and in all other places too, he says, all around the Middle East and later all around the world.

14) And many of the brethren in the Lord, waxing confident by my bonds (imprisonment), are much more bold to speak the word without fear. (KJV)

Paul's mouth was shut in prison to a certain extent, although he preached to those around him to the point that Caesar's court heard him, but he wasn't out traveling and preaching the gospel. So the brethren took up the cause and began preaching boldly and the gospel was advanced because of the trials that God and Christ allowed to Paul. Paul's imprisonment benefited the advancement and furtherance of the gospel.

Look again at what Paul learned as a result of his trials. Let's go to 2 Corinthians, chapter 12. We read verses 7 through 9 earlier and let's read verse 10. Notice what he learned about this horrible life he had lived since he had been converted. I mean horrible in a physical way, a human way.

2 Corinthians 12:10. *Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities (this thorn in the flesh and his broken bones and bruises, etc.) in reproaches, in necessities (meaning going without basic necessities) in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake (He says "I take pleasure in all of that) for when I am weak, then I am strong.*

He says through God and Christ. What a valuable lesson. You see Paul, given his background, could never learn that lesson because he trusted in himself. He had to go through all of that and he had to have the thorn in the flesh to learn to trust God and Jesus Christ and not himself, and he learned that. It was painful, yes. It was over a long period of time, yes, but look what he learned at the end of the day and he could not learn that any other way given his background, given his training and given his credentials.

Let's go to another scripture, Philippians 3 and we'll read verses 7 and 8. Sometimes people can get proud of their background; where they went to college or the jobs they have held or all of that. I had a man once say to me in the Church years ago, he said, "People would respect me more if they knew my resumé." I'm not kidding. Those were his exact words, quoted exactly. Well, Paul could say the same thing, "People would respect me more if they knew my training and background and all of that." Now notice his attitude at the end of the day.

Philippians 3:7. *But what things were gain to me (all his background, his credentials and resumé), those I counted loss for Christ.
8) Yea, doubtless, and I count all things [but] loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord ... (KJV)*

He would not have that knowledge if he hadn't suffered.

8b) ... for whom I have suffered the loss of all things ...

He was in jail, he was in prison, he had no home. All of his tent making supplies had long ago disappeared. He had no possessions. He had nothing. He was in jail.

8c) ... and do count them (those things he had lost) [but] dung (but crap we would say, I count it all garbage), that I may win Christ,

What he is saying is that physical stuff, resumés, backgrounds, human accomplishments, mean nothing, and we need to learn that. He says it means nothing. What counts is that I win Christ. Everything that happened to Paul was for his benefit, to humble him, to have him look to Christ and not himself. Everything that happened to him was for the benefit of the New Testament Church, and everything that happened to him by way of the scriptures is for us today. We learn lessons by seeing the example of Paul.

So let's ask the question: Is God eagerly waiting to punish? God just can't wait to strike this man down, or did everything that Christ or God allowed to happen to happen to him, was it ultimately for his good and the Church's good? We will answer those questions.

We've seen today the examples of two Godly men and the ancient nation of Judah. All of them suffered many trials and many hardships. But I think we can easily see that God's goal in their trials, in these two men and this nation, was to bring all of them to the family of God. Most of ancient Israel, and certainly Joseph and Paul will be in the family of God. God's purpose in allowing all of that to happen was to bring His children to eternal life.

So let's ask the question: What can we take away, what lessons can we learn from these three examples? We're going to talk about three lessons very briefly. When we have severe trials; Victor Schuller died and it's a tragedy; Carolyn Schamblin died and it's a tragedy for the family. When they were going through trials, and we've known other people who are not here who have gone through trials, Arnie Aho and many others. In the middle of severe trials, we need to remember these three lessons.

The overall point we're trying to make is that God loves us so much that He does nothing for our harm. He does everything for our ultimate good and ultimate benefit.

Let's go to Proverbs 12:21. I read this scripture after a few years in the Church and I didn't understand it, because it seemed to be counter to my experience. We've seen people suffer. We've seen bad things happen to God's people. We naively assumed this would occur in one way, but we learned that it occurs in a total different way.

Proverbs 12:21. There shall no evil happen to the just: but the wicked shall be filled with mischief.

There shall no evil happen to the just, but by our own experience and our own eyewitness, evil has happened to the just. Evil has come upon us and will come upon

us, but what does this mean? How can you reconcile this verse with what we just covered? What this verse is saying is there will be no lasting evil come upon the just. It will not last because the evil that comes upon us God either causes or allows for our long-term good. So there is no lasting evil that will come upon the just, those who are in a right standing with God.

Now let's go to the New Testament. Romans 8:28. This is a very familiar scripture we quote often, but let's read the scripture in light of the three examples we've seen and hopefully we'll have a deeper understanding of this very famous scripture. We often quote this when we're going through trials, but hopefully it will have a deeper meaning.

Romans 8:28. *And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God ...*

Everything that happened to Joseph was for his benefit. Everything that has happened to ancient Israel was for their benefit, Judah and Israel alike; everything that happened to Paul was for his benefit and the benefit of the Church.

28b) ... to them who are the called according to [his] purpose. (KJV)

His purpose is to have children, to have a family and everything that happens to us is there for a reason and a purpose. Not like Einstein felt, that God wound up the clock and set it on a shelf and walked away and then it just happened. No. God is intimately involved in everything that happens to us, and everything He causes or allows is for our good. They all work together to mold us and shape us into the image of Jesus Christ. We can have faith that no matter what the trial, even unto death, God will be with us no matter what and that what He is doing is for our benefit. That's the first lesson.

God loves us so much that He has given us the Church to be our refuge and to be our help.

He loves us so much that He has given us the Church. Now think about this, God didn't have to give the Church. He didn't have to form a Church. He didn't have to have a body of Jesus Christ. He could have just called individuals all around the world, little bits and pieces, never having a Church.

Let's go to 1 Corinthians 12 and let's read these very familiar scriptures, but from the understanding that it is a loving God that gives us the body of Christ, the Church. We wouldn't be here today right now, in this room or wherever you are watching or listening. We wouldn't be there gathered together without the Church.

1 Corinthians 12:12. *For as the body is one, and has many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body; so also [is] Christ.
13) For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether [we] be Jews or Gentiles, whether [we be] bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.*

14) For the body is not one member, but many. (KJV)

We all need to learn that. The body isn't, in the case of the Worldwide Church of God, Herbert Armstrong. The body isn't the man at the top. Today, look at all the groups, and the body isn't the guy at the top, it just isn't.

18) But now has God set the members every one of them (individually) in the body, as it has pleased him. (KJV)

He has called each one of us and placed us in the Church in a way that pleases Him.

25) That there should be no schism in the body; but [that] the members should have the same care one for another.

No respect of persons, no people above other people as far as love and kindness and goodness and serving one another, none of that.

26) And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honored, all the members rejoice with it. (KJV)

The Church should always be a blessing to God, in good times and in bad times. It should be a refuge and a sanctuary and a place of peace. That's what we attempt to do. We work very hard, all of us, to make the Church a place of peace.

I remember one of my first ministerial conferences back around 1979, '80 or '81. We had a conference and, of course, I was a young local Church elder and I was a wall flower standing in the back. There was a group of ministers talking and there was one very prominent minister in this circle. Richard Rice, I believe was an evangelist at the time and he walked up to me and introduced himself which shocked me. We chatted, you know, "How are you? Where are you from?" He seemed sincerely interested. So then other men came around and this one prominent minister started talking about how he used the ministerial trainees, coming out from Pasadena. He talked about how he used them as his personal servants. They mowed his lawn. They washed his car and went to the grocery store and did errands, they babysat and did this and that. He had this smile and smirk about it like, "Look at the power I have. I've got a couple of slaves here (his wife included) to do my bidding." While he was pontificating, Richard Rice leaned over to me and whispered in my ear something I will never forget. He said, "That's funny. I thought the Church was supposed to be a blessing for God's people." This other man was making it a curse to those people beneath him. You see, God loves us so much that He gave us the Church. It should be a blessing. As I said, we work very, very hard, each one of us individually to make the Church a blessing.

Let's go to Ephesians, chapter 4 and we'll read verses 11 through 16. God loves us so much that He has given the Church to us and made us part of the Church. Notice God's motives here. In the past this was often used as a whip and a chair, but notice the motives of God.

Ephesians 4:11. *And he (Christ) gave (the Church) some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers*

These are job descriptions, but notice for what purpose. Why did He do this? Why did He give this gift?

12) *For the perfecting of the saints (that's the purpose), for the work of the ministry (meaning ministering to the saints), for the edifying of the body of Christ (meaning for the saints' benefit):*

13) *Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man (meaning a complete man or woman), unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (KJV)*

He gave these job descriptions for people to do so that the Church could be molded and shaped into the image of Jesus Christ.

14) *That we [henceforth] be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, [and] cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; (KJV)*

Just like Satan lies and waits to deceive and to kill and destroy and steal. So all of this was done for our protection and for our safety.

15) *But speaking the truth in love (not out of harshness; not out of a desire to control or have power, but in love), may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, [even] Christ:*

The goal and purpose is to be molded and shaped in the image of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Verse 16 I will read out of the New King James.

16) *... from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies ... (NKJV)*

There are major joints and smaller joints, and all of us in that sense are a joint. Think of all the joints in the body: fingers, toes, shoulders, elbows and all the joints in the neck and the back.

16b) *according to the effective working by which every part does its share (Every member has a part to play. Every member has something to contribute. Every member has something to share.), causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself (the body) in love. (NKJV)*

Let me just give you one example. Dorothy's not here today, but we met some friends at the Feast this year. We had known them forty years ago in Boston and saw them for

the first time here forty years later. The wife came up to Dorothy and said, "I just want to thank you because when I came into the Church in the 60s, I walked in and you were there. We didn't know each other. I was new and scared and I didn't know what I was getting into and I was nervous. I came up to you and you greeted me as a friend and talked to me and you showed me kindness and gentleness and love and it helped me for the first year or two in the Church. You helped me greatly." Dorothy said later, "I don't remember a thing. I don't remember any of that. I don't remember what I said. I don't remember that happening." It happened more than once.

It goes to show that our daily example, our daily attitude comes out and serves and helps people in ways we cannot comprehend. We have a part to play. It isn't just the minister pontificating behind the lectern. We all have a part to play. We all have a role. We're all joints and ligaments and muscles and bones and we have things to do for the benefit of the Church. The Church, you see, becomes a vehicle whereby we are edified and sheltered and protected and then where we can serve and assist one another. That is all a gift from God. If we are all led, and we stress that a lot, if we're all led by the Holy Spirit, the Church will be for our benefit and never for our harm, just as God does with us. It is a loving gift. The Church is a loving gift from God.

The third and final lesson or take-away from these three examples is that these three examples should increase our faith in the ultimate goodness of God that will get us through any trial and any difficulty and any obstacle.

The ultimate goodness of God will get us through anything. Let's go to Hebrews 11 and verse 6. We know this by heart. It talks about faith. But notice maybe part of this we haven't focused on before.

Hebrews 11:6. But without faith [it is] impossible to please [him] (absolutely true) for he that comes to God must believe that he is (meaning that He exists) and [that] he is (notice this; the nature of God) a rewarder of them that diligently seek him. (KJV)

This tells us that we have to have faith that God wants to reward us with sonship and being in His family. We have to have faith that His ultimate goal and motive is to reward us with eternal life in His kingdom. With that in mind, let's go to 2 Corinthians 4 and we'll read verses 17 and 18. I'll read this out of the NIV; it just flows better and I think can be comprehended a little easier. This is Paul talking. We just went over all of his trials; the beatings, the scourging, the shipwreck and the stoning and all of that. Notice what he says. Notice what he can say.

2 Corinthians 4:17. For our light and momentary troubles ...

He said, "My troubles are light and momentary." Now looking from the aspect of eternity, the years that Paul went through trial and trouble are very small. The fact is if you look at the numbers, Paul was in the Church before he died shorter than most of us

and the trials that he went through, looking at it from a perspective of eternity, were light and momentary. What is the goal for these light and momentary troubles?

17b) *...are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. (NIV)*

Far greater than the trouble and pain and the suffering that we go through in this physical life.

18) *So (because of that, this goal, this glory) we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (NIV)*

We have to see as God sees. Joseph, Paul, Israel; God saw the big picture, creation to eternity. As I've said before, we see through soda straws. We look like this and we stumble around and we don't see the big picture. We must see as God sees and we have to keep our eyes on the ultimate goal which is to be His children in His kingdom. That goal is the greatest possible blessing. We talk about blessings, winning the lottery and we joke about that. The greatest possible blessing comes from our loving God and that is to have eternal life as one of His kids, one of His children.

So this third point is that we have to have faith that no matter what trial awaits us, God's love for His children will shepherd us through. He will take us by the hand as a little kid and walk us through this trial or trouble. 1 Peter 5:7; we won't turn there. I think most of us know this. It says, "*Casting all your cares on Him.*" Why? "*Because He cares for you.*" He cares for each one of us, such a loving God. Our Father will take us by the hand because He cares for us and walk us through whatever lies ahead.

So, let's conclude now. We've seen three examples. We've seen three lessons that we can take away from these examples. Now I'm just speaking personally, I've had a lot of trials and stress in the last five to ten years; personally in the sense that Dorothy has had three hips, cancer surgery, breast cancer, and knee and carpal tunnel surgery. That's just on a personal level and then all that has happened in the Church in the last five years or so. Once again and I say once again because you learn it and sometimes you forget it; I've had to learn to give up and admit I cannot do it. I don't have it in me. Paul had to learn the same thing. Despite his credentials and resumé, he did not have it in him. It had to come from Christ and it had to come from God. We have to learn and I have learned this over and over again that His way is the only way that works ... His way, not mine, not my thoughts or desires. His way is the only way that works. I said in the beginning, once we commit our way to God, all that He causes or allows is for our ultimate good and our ultimate benefit.

Therefore, because of that, if we learn that lesson, then we won't have the worries and fears that we talked about in the introduction. So with that in mind, let's go to Philippians 4, verses 6 and 7. Final scripture, and we'll read this out of the New King James. If we understand this, if we learn this lesson, not just academically but in our gut, emotionally, then Philippians 4:6 will apply.

Philippians 4:6. *Be anxious for nothing (don't worry about anything), but in everything (meaning even in our trials) by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving (Paul was thankful for his trials), let your requests be made known to God*

If we do that,

7) and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding (certainly all human understanding), will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. (NKJV)

Satan will not get through to us. Satan will not get us off track. When we go through a trial as Paul did, we will welcome it because there are things that we would not learn otherwise. We will never get into a situation of shaking our fist at God or being angry with God. I've known people in the past who have done that. But the point is, God is eager for us to become His children. We have to have faith in that.

Now let's understand this closing thought; let's understand God is sovereign. That means He can do anything He wants. If He woke up tomorrow morning and decided in the blink of an eye He could eliminate the entire universe, "You know, I'm just going to start over..." he could do that because He is sovereign. So we need to be eternally thankful that God doesn't change. His plan doesn't change and on the backside of all the plan, the motivation for creating the plan in the first place is love, His love for His children, His love for His people.

So let's understand that we should be eternally thankful that our God is a God who does nothing for our hurt, nothing for our harm, but everything He does, big and small, He allows or causes for our ultimate benefit and that benefit is to be in His kingdom eternally as His children. Let's understand that. Let's be thankful for it and when trials inevitably will come, let's remember these lessons from God's word.