

Faith Under Fire – Part 2

2 Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. **(James 1:2-4 (ESV))**

More than ever, during these uncertain days while our nation continues to deal “fearfully” with this “virus”, the central message of this text that we’ve been studying here in these words, “the testing of our faith”, is brought to the forefront of our thinking.

Over the past several weeks, so much “information” has been passed over the airways. And because most people are fearful by nature, we have stayed glued to the news media, searching for the next bit of “information”, with our minds and our emotions seeking ways to somehow deal rightly with all that we are being told.

And so often, we haven’t known what we’re supposed to believe about it all. Because each so-called expert has had a different opinion.

And the news media, by nature, must give their reports in such a way as to keep us glued to, and depending upon them and their perspectives, else they cannot sell their information to us. And unfortunately, “fear” seems to be their most effective method of keeping us dependent upon them. “Fear”!

And all of this is very personal to each of us. With some of us, the “fear” can be intense, so much so, that it alters the way we think about most everything that is taking place. And with every “new” thing being reported by the media, our fears grow and grow.

And again, “fear” can be so very controlling! And not only for us personally, but also, as a nation of people. We have only to observe the dramatic rise and fall of the stock market each day to see it take place. Our stock brokers tell us that they make decisions based upon analytical study. But folks, that is only partially true. It is also very obvious that stock market decisions are, for the most part, “fear driven”.

And then also, most of us are very relational people, needing to enjoy the company of friends, hugging each other, eating together. But in this crisis, we have been told not to do that. We have been instructed to isolate ourselves and take the “next-best thing” of visiting friends on “social media”, which really is just not the same.

So then, with all of the information that has been and still is being poured out upon us, what are we, as Christians supposed to think and to do?

We have questions. And probably one of the most asked questions is, “during times such as these, when everything is so chaotic and no one seems to be in control of anything, what is God doing? Is He in control? What is God’s role in all of this?”

And I must confess to you that it is in these exact kinds of circumstances of “trials and testings” that I am so glad that God has called me into what we, in this church, call the “Reformed Faith”. It is at these moments that some of the first and most basic of our “Reformed” beliefs are brought to the forefront.

It is now that we remind ourselves that while it may not look like God is “sovereign” and in control, He is! He really is!

And listen folks, God is not just a little bit “sovereign”, or “sovereign” over just certain specific matters, but He is “totally sovereign”, having power and authority and control over everything that exists, both in the heavens and on the earth.

And we in the Reformed Faith also believe that God is not only “sovereign”, but that He is also “providential”, meaning that God does, very intentionally, reach His “Hand” into all the matters that are taking place on the earth, and He orchestrates their conditions and their outcomes. And folks, it is essential that we understand this to be true right now, especially with every part of this Coronavirus Pandemic.

And trusting that to be true, gives me great peace. By trusting that God truly is Sovereign and that His Divine Hand is in everything that is taking place, the “sting of fear” is taken away and is replaced by great peace and confidence.

What do I mean? I mean that, yes, God really does have the “whole world in His Hand”. And He is lovingly caring for every person that lives and breathes and has their being on this earth, and especially those of us who have Him as our Savior and Lord.

Simply put, He, God, has been personally and intimately involved in every minute detail of this “Covid19 Pandemic” from the first moment of its beginning.

And not in the manner that so many of our Arminian brethren think, that God is standing off at a distance, watching and observing, and only intervening in the worst of moments as we cry out in prayer, and only then coming in with His “clean-up crew” of Romans 8:28, to straighten out the mess that misguided mankind has created.

No, folks! That is not the way that God exercises His sovereign care and control over this world.

One of the articles from our Westminster Confession of Faith declares that God Himself is the “first cause” of all that is, and all that takes place on the earth. And that article goes on to tell us that while yes, He is the “first cause”, He also providentially permits “secondary causes” by people, politicians, world leaders, the news media, and even you and me . . . meaning that although people can and do cause many things to take place, our “causing” is ever and always under the “divine supervision and control” of God’s “first cause”.

And God cautions us strongly in Isaiah 8:12 to not always be calling these things that take place a “conspiracy”. Yes, men to conspire, but He, God, is ever and always the “first cause”, guiding and controlling all that takes place.

And that is comforting to me, that I know that whatever I may do, or that someone else may do, using what many call “free will”, those things are still under the intimate power and control of God’s Providential Hand. We never operate independently of God’s Will.

Even satan himself cannot operate independently of God. In every situation, satan and his minions must first ask God’s permission. And even then, whatever satan does with that permission will only be used to carry forward God’s predetermined plan.

And so, it is! God is involved in everything that takes place. And He has been involved from the very beginning.

Unfortunately, even some of us long-time Reformed folks, tend to shrink back from thoughts such as these. Especially as we think about all the trials and suffering that have taken place with this virus. It is then that such beliefs as God being “Totally Sovereign” and personally involved in all these matters become “hard sayings” for us, similar to those other “hard saying” that scripture talks about.

Recall that on one occasion Jesus was giving some “hard sayings” and on that occasion most of His disciples actually walked away and deserted Him, leaving only the twelve.

And some sayings truly are “hard”! That’s because they run so contrary to our natural human thinking. And few people can accept and believe them.

And so, I would ask you and me today, is it such a “hard saying” to believe that God really is sovereign and providential in His handling of all these matters that have been taking place recently, so “hard” that we too would walk away from our Savior and from our trust in Him.

I bring us that question for a couple of reasons. First, because I find the alternative to my believing that God is absolutely sovereign is to believe instead that all of this chaotic mess that we are currently experiencing is a result of some random people making random wrong decisions, bringing us to where we are today.

May I say that again . . . the alternative to my believing that God is absolutely sovereign is to believe that all of this chaotic mess is a result of some random people making random wrong decisions, bringing us to where we are today.

And if that be so, then every other thing that is going wrong on this earth is also being caused by other random people making other random wrong decisions, meaning that this whole world and everything in it is totally and completely out of control.

And if that be true, then our only hope rests in some random political leaders making some random “right” decision to save us from our doom.

And folks, that kind of thinking is so much “harder” for me to believe and to accept than the “Hard sayings” within these scriptures about God actually being sovereign and in control of all this mess.

If even one molecule of matter can resist God’s control and providential care, then everything in existence will eventually spin out of control and “fear” and chaos and “terror” will take place.

I would love to stop at this moment and let you offer your thoughts about all that I’m saying, but I know that I’m not supposed to do that during these messages. So, I won’t.

But folks, isn’t God so loving and so generous to those of us who have placed our faith in Him, to give us the peace and the confidence to know that, one way or another, He personally will carry us through this turmoil.

That’s what the twelve disciples decided to do when Jesus said His “hard sayings” to them. He asked them why they too didn’t walk away from Him. And Peter, answering for the twelve said, “Lord, who else can we turn to, only You have the words of life”.

And so, it must also be with you and me. We must not turn away and believe that all of this is just a bunch of random bad decisions by some foolish men, but rather, that it is part of an intentional plan being worked out by our Sovereign God.

Now . . . with that being said, where do we go from here? Because in light of all the suffering and death that has been taking place, such thoughts about God being sovereign and personally involved, can bring some of God’s own people to question His “goodness”. And even go so far as to “blame” God for the difficulties we are in, even indicting Him for crimes against us.

Well folks, for those of us who have placed our trust in Christ, this is when our “faith”, which is being “tested” will, of necessity have to rise up and take possession of our thoughts and our emotions.

By faith, we who believe in God know that He truly is absolutely “Holy”, and absolutely “Righteous”, and that He really and truly can do no wrong. It is not within His character and not within His being to do anything wrong or evil. And we must repent and know that it is our own thinking that must be corrected.

Which then brings us back to the words of scripture that we’ve been studying, words that seem to say to us that God uses most every incident of our life as a “testing ground for our faith”. Listen again!

2 Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:2-4 (ESV))

I was reminded in a recent message by John MacArthur, that the “testing of our faith” is not for the purpose of revealing to God how strong our faith might be. No, God is omniscient, He already knows how strong or how weak our faith is. The “testing of our faith” is instead to reveal to us, to our own minds and souls, just how strong or how weak our faith is. That is a critical understanding for us to grab hold of. And because of that, we should be keen observers of our own responses to all the many encounters and difficulties of our day.

And again, the recognition that all those incidents and encounters are all coming by the Providential Hand of God, whether they be matters involving this virus, or the politicians that intentionally use our sufferings for their own gain, or the misguided and biased news media, or even just the ordinary problems of our day with the people we know, our neighbors, God’s providential Hand is there, at every turn and at every encounter.

He brings into being and orchestrates most all of it. Yes, again, mankind, you and I, produce many “secondary causes”. And yes, we exercise our “will” constantly, doing things that are wrong and evil. But somehow, and I confess that I do not know how it all works out, but those things that we men and women do truly are secondary causes and are always under the sovereign control of God’s own Hand.

. . . We only have a short time remaining. May I take these last few minutes to consider just how these things can work out through God's providential orchestration. For example, as we consider these first words of our text carefully, "Count it all joy, when you meet trials of various kinds". The King James version uses the words, "fall into trials", giving the sense that for the circumstances God is addressing here, we are not being willful in our behavior, we don't necessarily cause the trials, but rather, we "fall into" those trials.

The Greek words translated here have the meaning of an unintentional stumble, and not a willful involvement . . . Just as you and I are not willfully involved in the trials and the sufferings brought on by this virus. But we are nonetheless engulfed in those "trials", and we must determine what our response is to be.

Now granted, you and I are not always innocent bystanders. Even as believers we know that we can and do willfully make really wrong decisions, causing pain and suffering to ourselves and to others. And we also have seasons of outright rebellion against God, where we willfully sin against Him. And those times, and those trials will have their own special consequences.

But these words that we are studying here today are addressing a whole other kind of trial and suffering, trials and suffering that will come from the guiding hand of a Father who loves us.

And if received rightly by us, the experience will produce a "harvest of righteousness" within our souls.

This is so important for you and me to realize and to accept, folks. Because to the degree that we are able to "see God's Hand" in the midst of our trials, that is the degree to which we can have a measure of peace as we suffer, and are able to "trust" that the outcome will be for our good.

Again, God is our loving Father. And He loves us more deeply than we could ever imagine. And He knows that His "rebuking" and His "chastening" of us will help us to "grow in righteousness".

He tells us that in Hebrews 12 where He says to us,

5 . . . "My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; 6 For whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives." 7 If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons. (Hebrews 12:5-7 (NKJV))

And He goes on to say in verse 11 of Hebrews 12,

11 no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. (Hebrews 12:11 (NKJV))

And here also in our text for today, we are told . . .

4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:4 (ESV))

Isn't this a wonderful thought! This is God, our loving Father, "working all things together for our good". And He doesn't ask that we "understand" everything He does, He simply asks us to "trust Him"

And as to the "fear" that seems always wanting to creep in and take control over our thoughts. This is where our "faith", that is being tested, must rise up and confront any "doubts" about what we know to be true about God, that God really is ever and always our loving Father, that "He always is good and He always does good", and that He is always pure and holy.

And as you and I "lean into" the intimate presence of the Holy Spirit, we'll hear His "still small voice" saying, "I love you, my child, and it's OK, this is Me at work".

Let's pray.