

Discernment in Difficulty 1-13-02

2 Corinthians 4:1,16-18, 1 Thessalonians 2:4, 1Peter 4:12-14, Hebrews 12:5-11

I want to acknowledge the inspiration of DeVern F. Fromke's book The Ultimate Intention. Sometimes you come across a work that clarifies thoughts you have had, filling them out and expanding the ideas. You immediately see the truth in it because the Lord has been teaching you the same thing. The author is a little further down the road of experience and revelation and has been anointed to express the thoughts in way that helps the mind to grasp them. It is borrowing from his insight that I bring this message today. By God's divine providence I was reading the particular chapter I will draw from when I heard of severe testing happening within our church family.

There are a number of people in our fellowship that are going through difficult times. The trials of life sometimes seem to engulf us at times, and threaten to snuff out our hope. Scripture tells us that we shouldn't be surprised as if some strange thing had happened to us. We should rejoice that we are partakers of Christ's sufferings. Of course, this implies that you have chosen the way of the cross and are suffering for the ministry you have been called to. We are invited to take up the cross. When we do, sufferings come along with it. Though we chose the cross we did not pick the particular form of suffering that accompanies the cross. That suffering usually comes in the form of misunderstanding of your motives, or rejection by others because of not grasping the call of God on your life. If it came from without the family of God it would be much easier to bear, but it usually comes from within.

This cross of Christ is not sickness or death of a loved one or financial need. People often refer to those difficulties as crosses. They are trials that life's circumstances have forced upon us. There is no escaping them. But the cross of Christ can be laid down. Let me give you an example. A young man discerns God's call to help in a rescue mission. There is no doubt in his heart that this is God's leading. Friends and family badger him with opposition. "You'll never make a living doing that. How could you support a wife in that kind of work? It is dangerous. If you decide to go that way we can't support you. You are ruining your life." He feels the weight of the cross as he begins to move in that direction. He can lay that down and take the job waiting for him in his father's business and forget about the cross, its weight and pain. In doing so God does not condemn him but he misses out on the joy of being in Christ, the blessing of walking in the good things God had prepared for him.

In walking in that calling God has for us, the Lord leads us to act in ways that others do not understand. We long for their understanding and support, but we have chosen the way of faith. Peter tells us to rejoice when that happens.

1 Peter 4:12-14 (NIV)¹² *Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.*¹³ *But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.* ¹⁴ *If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.*

Going on in God to maturity that He desires means a continued testing. 1 Thess 2:4b (NIV) *We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts.* The word 'tests' is the word used to search for impurity in a metal. God is continually refining to prepare you for service and for eternity. He purifies our hearts again and again. Ever hotter refining fires are used to purify precious metals, and so our trials get more and more intense, as the dross boils up and is skimmed off or consumed.

Other than the trials of the cross of Christ, there are trials we cannot lay down. These trials come from one of the following sources. It is imperative that we discern the source, for that determines the appropriate response. When faced with a trial we need to examine our heart in prayer and ask God to show us if the trial is because of our cross or is there something we need to change. It has been said that God whispers in the stillness but shouts in our afflictions. The four most common sources are these: chastisement, reaping, oppression and hindrances. We'll look at each one to note the differences.

When we choose to become a son, we have placed ourselves under the Father's discipline. The more you are loved, the more faithfully your parents watch to correct you when you go astray. I often say, "I know I am greatly loved of God, because I can't get away with anything!" I thank God for that! It gives me a healthy and grateful fear of God. I appreciate it because I know sin is destructive. His boundaries are placed upon me for my own well-being and because as His son I represent Him. Hebrews 12:5-11 (NIV)⁵ *And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,⁶ because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son."⁷ Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?⁸ If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons.⁹ Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live!¹⁰ Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.¹¹ No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.*

There is clearly stated the reason God disciplines us, "*for our good, that we may share in his holiness.*" The final result of that discipline: "*it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.*" What a privilege and what a great end result! If that is the source of the discipline we should take note and learn, receive the correction with a grateful heart from a God who has a wonderful goal in His heart for us – mature righteous sons in harmony with Him.

If I discern God is disciplining me I seek to understand the reason. Where have I been resisting the Holy Spirit? Where have I hardened my heart? I pray for God to open my eyes to any preferences I have over His will. Sometimes I find God afflicts us in a way that is allegorical. If my ears are infected have I been refusing to listen to Him? If my finances are in trouble have I been faithful in using them as He leads, and trusting Him to meet my need? But if after searching your heart and finding a clear

conscience then I look at natural consequences or reaping. I do continue to pray that if I have overlooked something God will reveal it. He wants me to understand – not guess.

Reaping is an altogether different story. It comes as the natural result of cause and effect. Whatever a man sows he will reap. Nature brings its own chastisement. If you take risks for fun, then the injury it results in is a natural consequence. Lay in the sun to have a nice tan, and realize that if you do so on a consistent basis, you should have the doctor check you for skin cancer. Sometimes we even reap because of the sinful actions of another. They will have to answer to God for their actions. I'm always amazed at people who are angry with God because they chose to act a certain way and reaped the natural consequences. It is always easier to blame God than your own stupidity or stubbornness.

If you discern you are reaping the consequences of your actions, then it may require you to go to God for forgiveness (as it probably involved disobedience or at least ignoring the Holy Spirit's check). Determine in your heart to be more aware of the consequences your actions may bring, and seek God's heart about those actions. Be wise.

For believers who are seeking to be God's instrument in this world, there are difficulties that arise from the oppression or intervention of Satan. He is the hinderer. He opposed the Apostle Paul when he wanted to go to certain locations. 1Thessalonians 2:18 (NIV)¹⁸ *For we wanted to come to you--certainly I, Paul, did, again and again--but Satan stopped us.* He opposed Jesus in the wind and waves and the demoniac and when Jesus was going to Decapolis. He particularly interferes when we are going to be used to bring the Gospel to souls under his captivity. Daniel realized that his opposition came from the enemy. Yet, too often, this can be our first response. "The devil is trying to stop me!" Is your heart such that he sees the need to interfere? If you are taking a big step forward in your spiritual growth it may be. Consider those that waited at the gate for Paul when he began preaching in Damascus. How different our Bible would be if Satan had stopped him there where his ministry began. You may need to escape the situation with the old "over the wall in a basket" trick. Or if you are on a mission from God to free those in Satan's clutches it may be.

Jesus was quick to discern when it was not just Peter, but Satan provoking Peter when Peter tried to dissuade Jesus from going to the cross. We must discern when it is the enemy keeping us from God's work. I believe God allows him to do that because the time is not yet right. With the above examples, the proper time did come and there was great success. If you discern your hindrance is from Satan, pray that God's will prevail in God's time. Resist the enemy in prayer and let God set your next course. Be positive in your response. Don't yield to fear or discouragement.

There is another form of attack that is inward rather than outward. It is sometimes completely separate from circumstances. I am speaking of a trouble within our very soul. Some saints call it 'the dark night of the soul'. I believe the source of this trial is most often Satan or his demons trying to sideline a servant of God. Consider Moses,

Elijah and Elisha. It presents itself as apathy, profound discouragement and hopelessness. Conditions become overblown. Outwardly we can often find no genuine source, at least none to warrant the way we feel. We pray but the heavens seem to be brass. People try to encourage us but it sounds like vain words.

Faith is the victory! We need to act without the feelings. Sometimes God may allow this kind of attack to free us from our dependency on feelings. We recognize the truth of God's word, and we stand by faith on that. We give a sacrifice of praise. We rebuke the voice of the devouring Discourager and offer a sacrifice of praise. Inundating ourselves with the Word of God and songs of praise we draw nigh to God, resist the enemy and he will flee. In overcoming, we realize it is not the circumstance that must change but our attitude and lack of faith in God's word that must change. Suddenly we can't understand what it was we were so depressed about.

God is sovereign over all and has allowed the difficulties to come our way to teach us. At other times, the hindrance should be resisted as the work of the enemy, and still others are meant to bring humility and repentance. It is important that we determine which are to be endured with patience and even rejoicing. One good work in every trial is that we are brought to the Lord in prayer to hear His heart concerning the difficulty. We receive that wisdom from above that we were lacking, discern the source of the trial, and respond as a mature son or daughter of God.

As we mature we have this testimony: 2 Cor 4:1,16-18 (NIV)¹ *Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.* ¹⁶ *Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.*¹⁷ *For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.*¹⁸ *So 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.* Our eyes are not fixed upon the conditions and difficulties here but the unseen. Eternity becomes a more clear hope day by day. Since our treasures are there we don't lose hope or heart. His promises are real, His work is sure, and He who began the good work will be faithful to complete it.

In all life's difficulties keep your eyes fixed on heaven. Discern the source. It may be a combination of some of the above. Life doesn't always fall into neat categories. Get prayer support! Remember, God is after mature sons and daughters and that requires a refining process. Submitted completely to Him, we are sure that nothing reaches us that is not going to help that work be completed. Then we can give thanks in everything. This need we have to carefully discern the source of our trouble is really a blessing. It keeps us in the place of a humble learner. The recognition of our need keeps us like sheep before the Shepherd; we learn to completely trust in all circumstances.

The fact that you, as a Christian, go through trials means you are being refined. Don't give up. Don't sit on the sidelines. The end result is much greater than any alternative you or the enemy of your soul can come up with. Stay in the battle. Have faith in God. If He is for you, who can be against you? "In the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer. I have overcome the world." Jesus