

GOD'S

PURPOSE IN TRIALS



INTRODUCTION

If you're not familiar with the history of the Jews, as recorded in the Old Testament, around 1800 BC, God rescued His people, using Moses, from their slavery to Pharaoh, and began the short journey up to the promised land of Canaan. Instead of discovering a land flowing with milk and honey, they encountered hardships and trials and difficulties because they didn't understand that God not only wanted to accomplish something FOR THEM in giving them Canaan, but IN THEM, teaching them how to walk by faith. They whined and fussed and complained. God led them to an extreme test of their faith, what scripture calls a "trial".

"And when they came to Marah, they could not drink the waters of Marah, for they were bitter; therefore it was named Marah. So the people grumbled at Moses, saying, 'What shall we drink?' Then he cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a tree; and he threw it into the waters, and the waters became sweet. There He made for them a statute and regulation, and there He tested them."

~ Exodus 15:23-25

God is so committed to our sanctification that this happened on only the third day since they had been rescued. God wasted no time in going to work on their character, through trials. Their exodus, their pilgrimage, is meant to be a picture of our lives. This world is not our home. As Jonathan Edwards put it, "The saint, all the while he is in this world, is like a pilgrim in a dark wilderness." All of us are plagued by trials. Some trials are like small little GNATS, that you just brush away, but they just hang around, nagging you to death. Others are like fierce DRAGONS that shake us to the very core of our being, and sometimes in our lives, we have to face M.O.A.T.s, or "the mother of all trials". Whatever form they come in, dragons, gnats or m.o.a.t.s, the scripture reveals that God is **purposeful** in them.

- *What do you think those first three days since being rescued were like for the Israelites?*
- *Would you consider this test a gnat, a dragon or a moat?*
- *What does this tell us about God?*
- *What do you think God is after in our lives, by allowing us to go through trials?*

Back to the Exodus, when the Israelites left Egypt, they headed across the Red Sea to Mount Sinai. From there it was only about a two-week journey into the Promised Land. Fourteen days turned into 40 years. Instead of God leading them by a direct route, He led them by an indirect, much longer route. In fact, of the estimated 3 million people invited to the Promised Land, only 2 crossed over because of this simple truth: they walked by what they saw instead of walking by faith. So, God designed a supernaturally long journey in order to deal with what was in their hearts.

This study will look at the size of God vs. the size of our trials, responding in faith to dragons and gnats, the Goodness and Wildness of God, and Surviving the M.O.A.T.

PART 1: THE SIZE OF GOD VS. THE SIZE OF OUR TRIALS



The infinite God of the universe doesn't fit into a little box, or into our back pocket. Consider the dimensions of our galaxy. The Milky Way, in which we live, contains more than 100 billion stars and is so large that even traveling at the speed of light would require 100,000 years to cross its diameter. Light travels approximately 5.87×10^{12} miles; in 100,000 years, that would be 5.87×10^{17} miles, or 587 quadrillion miles in one year just to cross the diameter of a single galaxy. If we drew a map of the Milky Way galaxy, and represented the Earth and Sun as two dots one inch apart (thus a scale of one inch equals 93 million miles—the distance between the Earth and the Sun), we would need a map at least four miles wide to locate the next nearest star, and a map 25,000 miles wide to reach the center of our galaxy. If the Milky Way Galaxy were reduced to the size of North America, our solar system by comparison, would be the size of a cup of coffee. And our Milky Way Galaxy is only one-trillionth of the known universe. There are an estimated 50 billion other galaxies, with 100 to 400 billion stars in each! In the light of the dimensions of the galaxy, we conclude one of two things:

1. If the universe is so vast, and since I am so small, my life must be fairly inconsequential and God somewhat distant and uninvolved.

OR...

2. If the universe is so vast, yet God has set His love upon me, my life must be fairly significant and God intimately involved.

Christians that have a very big God can handle very big trials. Look at these wise words of passionate God followers who've gone through great hardships.

“We -- or at least I -- shall not be able to adore God on the highest occasions if we have learned no habit of doing so on the lowest.”

~ C. S. Lewis

“Trials are medicines which our gracious and wise physician prescribes because we need them; and he proportions the frequency and weight of them to what the case requires. Let us trust in His skill and thank Him for His prescription.”

~ John Newton

“The Lord's mercy often rides to the door of our heart upon the black horse of affliction.”

~ C.H. Spurgeon

“God will not look you over for medal, degrees or diplomas, but for scars.”

~ Elbert Hubbard

“It is doubtful God can use any man greatly until He has hurt him deeply.”

~ A.W. Tozer

“The one who hungers and thirsts after righteousness can feed on the myrrh of the gospel as well as the honey.”

~ Thomas Watson

- *Which of the two responses to the Milky Way’s vastness do you tend toward? How do you think you can change that?*
- *Comment on the above quotes; which do you like the most? The least? What size of God do they reveal to you? Why?*

REALIZE GOD HAS A REASON. He has a goal, He is working toward something. Remember that scripture tells us that “God causes ALL things to work together for good” (Romans 8:28). Whether our trials are due to simply living on a fallen planet, or whether it’s due to sin in our own lives, or due to the sin of others, God uses the good, the bad, and the ugly to shape us into the image of His Son.

God’s great goal, then, is transformation through trials.

Once you catch a picture of what could be, what you could become through trials, you stop complaining about what is.

PART 2: RESPONDING IN FAITH TO DRAGONS AND GNATS

You can expect four kinds of problems in life:

- **Trials are designed by God to draw us closer to him and build our character.**
- **Temptations are designed by the Devil to draw us away from God and destroy our character.**
- **Trespasses are the consequences of the sins and selfishness of others.**
- **Troubles are usually, but not always, the consequences of our sin and selfishness.**

We all face trials, temptations, trespasses and troubles, but whether the origin is God, Satan, others, ourselves, or just life, God is at work. So, God is at work, but what is He after? James gives us a clue.

“2 Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. 4 And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. 5 But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.”

~ James 1:2-5

There are three specific steps, in relation to trials, that we can take:

(1) Give thanks and be joyful! Why? Simply because God has rescued you. He's saved your life from hell. He's died for you on the cross. When we remember that, our lives can be a powerful display to unbelievers of our relationship with God. When we forget that, we grieve God with our ingratitude.

When I hear somebody sigh, "Life is hard," I am always tempted to ask, "Compared to what?" -Sydney J. Harris

When the storms of life strike, it's what happens in you that determines what happens through you.

"The chief pang of most trials is not so much the actual suffering itself as our own spirit of resistance to it."

~ Jean Nicholas Grou

(2) Trust that God is using the trial to shape you; do not lose heart! You must have ENDURANCE because many trials don't last days or weeks, but months and years. We must endure so we do not give in to despair.

Oh, my soul, this is not the place of despair. This is not the time to despair. As long as my eyes can find a promise in the Bible, as long as there is a moment left to me of breath or life in this world, so long will I wait or look for mercy, so long will I fight against unbelief and despair."

~ John Bunyan

"Life is a grindstone. Whether it grinds you down or polishes you depends on what you're made of."

~ Anonymous

(3) Ask God for wisdom, both in the purpose of the trial and for how to handle it. In the context of trials, God promises wisdom. He may or may not reveal why He is taking you through the trial, but He does promise the wisdom to know how to endure it.

A Crucial Delineation

"No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it."

~ I Corinthians 10:13

“For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; 9 indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead”

~ 2 Corinthians 1:8-9

There is a myth common in Christianity that says, “God will never give you more than you can handle.” It is a misinterpretation of 1 Corinthians 10:13, which expresses that our temptations to sin are not beyond the reach of God to help us. It is most definitely NOT saying we can handle what life brings in our own resources. In fact, that is precisely the point of 2 Corinthians 1:8-9. Paul faced circumstances that were completely overwhelming, yet it was purposeful of God, to cause Him to trust God, not himself. This is a powerful clue to handling all that life brings. God is always, I say always...I mean ALWAYS seeking to cause us to depend on Him, moment by moment, through the Holy Spirit. A godly response to trials is not the result of our flesh; it is the result of the Spirit working within us.

- *Why is this crucial delineation “crucial”?*
- *In what way does the 2 Corinthians passage say the opposite of the 1 Corinthians passage is wrongly interpreted?*
- *How does this reveal what God is after in trials?*

Whether by dragons or gnats, **God raises up CRISES OF FAITH** for an express purpose: that we would be stripped of our self-reliance, our securities, and that we would rely on Him.

PART 3: THE GOODNESS AND WILDNESS OF GOD

“The reason the mass of men fear God, and at bottom dislike Him, is because they rather distrust his heart.”

~ Herman Melville

“We live our lives before the wild, dangerous, unfettered, and free character of the living God.”

~ Walter Bruggemen

God is not just revealed in scripture as being good, but the epitome of goodness, beauty, compassion and grace. On the other hand, He is also unpredictable, untamable, and unwilling to be domesticated (Though we would prefer Him a little less wild). God’s “wildness” moves Him to work in our lives in such a way that is not what we would expect. We experience heartache and suffering and, therefore, question

God's goodness. God, as revealed by Jesus Christ, is both perfectly good, but also, absolutely untamable. Our Messiah is both "the Lion of Judah" and "the Lamb that was slain." He is both the Lion and the Lamb, and that is precisely why we struggle to trust the goodness of God. It is this blend of goodness and wildness that C.S. Lewis captured so perfectly in his description of Aslan in The Chronicles of Narnia:

*"Is-is he a man? Asked Lucy? "Aslan a man!" said Mr. Beaver sternly. "Certainly not! I tell you he is the king of the wood and the son of the great Emperor beyond the sea. Don't you know he is the king of the beasts? Aslan is a lion. The lion! The great Lion!" "Ooh," said Susan, "I thought he was a man. Is he-quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion!" "That you will, dearie, and make no mistake" said Mrs. Beaver, "If there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most, or else just silly!" "Then he isn't safe?!" asked Lucy. "Safe?" said Mr. Beaver. "Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? **Who said anything about safe?! Course he isn't safe. But he is good. He's the King I tell you!"***

The Bible tells us that God's will is "good and acceptable and perfect," but it also tells us that we will experience confusion, disappointment and frustration. Remember, we live in the "Now, and not yet" of God's kingdom. God's kingdom has come, but not fully. We live in between the first coming of Jesus and the second coming of Jesus, in the "now and not yet" of God's kingdom. In this period of human history, the purpose of our trials is often not explained to us. It is only in eternity, with Jesus, that God's "righteous acts have been revealed" (Rev 15:4). We will then be able to make sense of our trials.

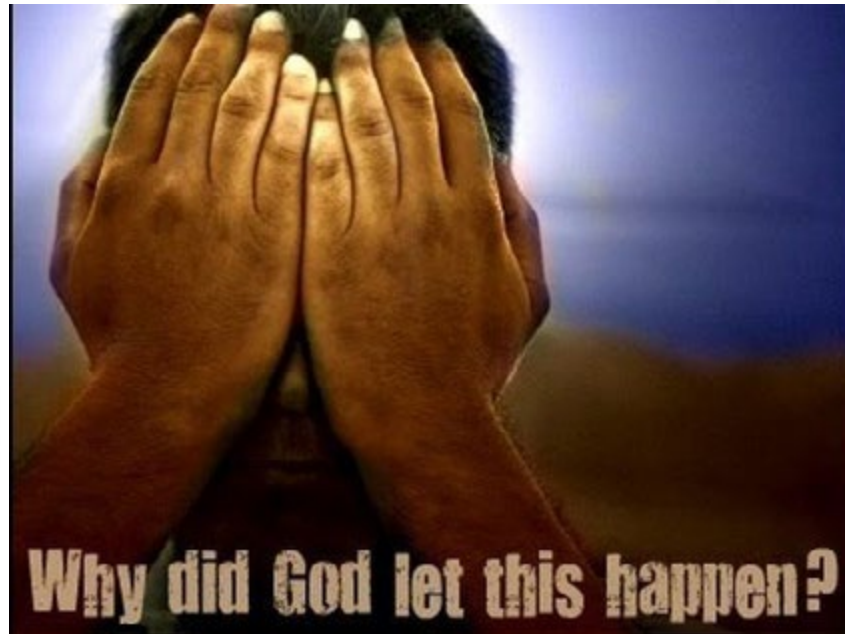
Listen, your life is going to be filled with things you don't understand. You will often ask, "Where is God?" or "Why did God allow this to happen?" Here, the words of Oswald Chambers come to our rescue: "I don't concern myself with what God is doing, only what God is." And God is good. His will is good and acceptable and perfect.

The cross of Jesus, is how Paul became convinced that God's plan for his life was good and acceptable and perfect, even if it included trials, hardships, and disappointments. Because the cross of Jesus reveals God working out His plan through the pain and suffering of Jesus, we can be assured that we will have to face confusion, pain, hardship, perplexity, frustration, disappointment and a host of other emotions.

- *How would you describe the wildness of God in your own words?*
- *Explain the "Now and Not Yet."*
- *How does this help us process the trials we go through?*

PART 4: THE MOTHER OF ALL TRIALS

Many people stop thinking at some point in their life that God cares about them, often because of pain and suffering. As John Eldredge has written, "God, do you really care for me? This is the question that has shipwrecked many of our hearts, leaving them grounded on reefs of pain and doubt." This is why becoming convinced of God's goodness is so important. Even when life is painful, we can trust that God is still there, still working out good in our lives.



John Eldridge wrote, "The terror we enter and the seeming lack of rescue from it leave us with a deeply imprinted question about God that we hide in our heart, sometimes not allowing the light of day to touch it for years, even deep into our spiritual journey. We cover the question with rationalizations that let Him off the hook and allow us to still believe, but our beliefs rest on foundations that move and quake under us. "God, do you really care for me?" "This is the question that has shipwrecked many of our hearts, leaving them grounded on reefs of pain and doubt."

The Mother of All Trials is a trial of such dimension and ferocity and power, that you simply may not make it through. This is Joseph in a prison for a crime he didn't commit as years and years go by. This is David being chased by a lunatic king Saul who seeks to slay him for years and years. This is Job, righteous before God but losing all that he had in a day, leaving him in the Dark Night of the Soul.

It is beyond this study to give exhaustive instruction about the dark night of the soul. Suffice it to say that the Bible is not silent about suffering, but rather, it says this:

- (1) Suffering is what it will cost some people to tell the world about Jesus.**
- (2) Suffering is purposeful; it deepens faith and holiness.**
- (3) Suffering enlarges the dimensions of our heart; we become capable of a deeper joy**
- (4) Suffering purifies our motives and our love of Jesus.**
- (5) Suffering is often what God uses to reveal Himself to us.**

To survive a MOAT, we have to gain a stronger prayer life; we need to have a language that can express the anguish, confusion, and doubt that accompanies genuine faith. The Psalms are filled with these rich, powerful expressions as David wrestles with his own trials. David learned what few believers are able to grasp. In the words of Frederick Buechner, "Even tragedy can be a means of grace that I might never have come to in any other way." Our trials open a way for us to know God at a much deeper level. Did you know that there are about eight different occasions where God revealed one of His names to His people? In the episode of Exodus 15, God revealed Himself as "Yahweh Rophe," that is, "the Lord our Healer." In other words, trials are the one of the greatest things that God uses to reveal Himself to us.

"The dark night of the soul comes just before revelation. When everything is lost, and all seems darkness, then comes the new life and all that is needed."

~ Joseph Campbell

There is a scene from *The Last Battle*, by C.S. Lewis, where a group of dwarves sit in darkness, huddled together in a tight little group. They believe they are in a pitch black stable, and consequently, they are insecure and afraid of the evil around them. In reality, they are in the midst of endless grassy countryside under a shining sun and a blue sky. The huge golden lion, Aslan, has surrounded them, as they are "kneeling in a circle around his forepaws and burying their hands and faces in his mane as he stooped his great head to touch them with his tongue." They are in the most secure place in the universe but their fear and loss of perspective blinds them to reality, to the goodness of Aslan.

In life, we will frequently FEEL surrounded by darkness, when in reality, a good God is overshadowing us and is still working out His perfect good in our lives. In the *Mother of All Trials*, we must simply see God. This is what the book of Job reveals to us. For 37 chapters, Job complains and asks "Why?" In the final chapters of the book, God appears to Job, but He never answers Job's question. And yet, Job was satisfied, having seen God.

*I lay my "whys"
before Your cross
in worship kneeling,
my mind too numb
my heart beyond all feeling
and worshipping,
realize that I
in knowing You
Don't need a "why"
~ Ruth Bell Graham*

To close off “the Mother of all Trials,” I want to read from an individual’s journal, as she wrestled with God’s wildness and goodness in the face of multiple miscarriages:

How often in my life do I want to feel safe? I want the security, the peace of knowing that the things I hope for and desire will work out. What I’m learning is that God’s will for my life is not safe. My hopes and dreams, desires and aspirations may not be in His will or His timing may be different. If I put my hope in what God will DO for me, then I’m in a vulnerable place, because my desires may not happen.

Or, you are pregnant and you go in for a checkup and the Dr. says she wants to run more tests. Week after week you pray and believe God will do a miracle, but He chooses not to. Is He still good? Does He care about the hairs on your head? Do His thoughts towards you outnumber the grains of sand on the seashore? Will you trust Him? Is your faith big enough, deep enough, and strong enough to handle it? Does He love you like He says He does? Does He really hear, does He really care, does He really answer?

I feel like I can now confidently answer YES! To all these questions. After losing our second child, I was very hurt, it was extremely traumatic but somehow through God, family, friends and my husband I got through.

I realized something. If I put my hope in what God will DO for me then I may possibly be hurt again because He may not always do what I hope for. But, if I put my hope in WHO HE IS, in His Character, then I will never be disappointed.

- *What do you think of the above journal entry? How long do you think she needed to go through this trial, to arrive at this faith?*
- *How does “the Last Battle” image from C.S. Lewis help us consider the M.O.A.T.?*

SUMMARY

In this study, we looked at the size of God vs. the size of our trials, responding in faith to dragons and gnats, the Goodness and Wildness of God, and Surviving the M.O.A.T. We looked at the Israelites being tested at the waters of Marah and we looked at a mom being tested with miscarriages, but the bottom line is this: God is intentional in the trials He brings us, but God is good in all that He does.

ACTION POINTS

There are three prayers to add to your prayer life.

1. One is the prayer of gratitude: "Lord, thank you for this trial. I trust that You have a sovereign purpose in it, and I don't want to resist that. I give you thanks by faith for it."
2. Another is the prayer of requesting wisdom based on the promise of James 1:5: "God, I ask You to give me wisdom. What are You after in this trial? How do You want to use it to shape me into the image of Jesus?"
3. Another is the prayer of surrender. Going through trials and not knowing why, surrender is the decision to trust God and live in obedience to Him even if you don't "get" what is going on in your life: "God I surrender to You. I want Your will, not mine. Even if this doesn't make sense, I surrender myself to You."