

FEAR NOT MY WRATH

Some time ago, I was faced with an enormously scary situation. As I sought counsel and consolation from some of my Christian friends and mentors, I received some interesting advice. Several individuals advised me that I should just come to terms with the likelihood that I would suffer and that God was probably behind it. They reminded me that the Bible promises that we all will endure hardship, and that the sooner I embraced Job's mantra, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust him" (Job 13:15), the better off I would be. As well intentioned as my friends may have been, something didn't seem right about their counsel. To be sure, they had a point. I could not deny the scriptures, and it did seem like I was on the fast track to misery. I considered that maybe I should just gear-up for a long, lonely trudge. But I could not help but wonder whether their advice was misguided. Had all of these people come to the same conclusion because that is, indeed, the way God works? Or had they all somehow fallen for the same distorted depiction of God's character? Wasn't it even conceivable that God would bring me through this unscathed, or is it always necessary to go through the fire?

After several days of prayer, I still could not shake the sense that God's message for me was not that I would enter into a season of suffering. I felt strongly that God wanted to show me a different way that He likes to deal with His people: through blessing. But why did that sound so foreign? And why didn't anyone else get the same impression?

Well, I'm happy to report that the sense I had was correct; God blessed me in such a profound way. He turned the entire situation around in very short order. I was amazed! Then I began questioning why I was so stunned. When did I stop expecting that God can teach just as well through the good times as He can through the bad?

The title for this article comes from a wonderful note a pastor wrote to me one weekend, during the time I was seeking wisdom on how to understand the miraculous result of this scary situation. She'd received a prophetic message from God for me, and she shared it in the form of a letter. It was utterly beautiful. In part, the message encouraged me that God had completely forgiven me for my sins. He told me that I was

blameless in His sight, and He added, "Fear not my wrath."

I hadn't reflected much on how I think of God in this way. But shortly after reading those words, relevant thoughts flooded to mind. I had lived in a constant state of: 1) expecting God to get angry with me for my perpetual sinfulness; 2) expecting God to punish me accordingly; and 3) expecting that God's main way of getting through to me, thick-skulled as I am, was to make me suffer ... and suffer often. In short, I had convinced myself that a walk with Christ is hard and painful, and that's just the way God wanted it. But in that moment, I realized that I had it all wrong. God began to open my eyes to the way He really sees me and the way He truly desires to deal with me. And if you are a follower of Christ, then God's message is the same for you. Below are just two examples of ways that I realized I had misunderstood God. Perhaps you can relate!

Example 1: Have you ever found yourself repeating the old cliché, "Be careful what you pray for!"? Have you stopped to think about what you are really saying? God enjoys being our provider; He wants to give us good gifts; and He wants us to strive for righteousness. What sense would it make, then, for Him to hammer us the moment we actually do what He asks? That would be nonsense. Now you might be thinking that there is some truth to the sentiment: it seems that the moment you decide to pray for patience, for example, everything and everyone start to get on your nerves. But I think that we have it backwards. If you have a problem with patience to the point that you are compelled to pray about it, then you probably have a tendency to be impatient (duh?). Is there really any wonder why—especially after you start paying special attention to it—you would encounter things that test your patience? Surely God may have something to do with it; He might be setting you up to practice your newly acquired virtue. But there would be no malice involved. He doesn't have some twisted sense of humor about all of this. God wants to see us freed; He is not interested in just seeing us uncomfortable. Get excited about the prospect of experiencing God's answer to your prayers, and dismiss any thought that you should be "careful" about praying for good things from God.

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Example 2: Do you get nervous at the thought of God taking your relationship with Him to the next level? Do you assume that the lessons God will teach you will involve intense suffering? This, too, is inconsistent with the character of God. The Bible teaches that God's general pattern is to reach His people through love and compassion. His first act in this regard was at creation when He made Man in His own image, gave Man dominion over all the earth, and dwelled with him. We see this again when He selected his Chosen People, Israel. His intention was to dwell with them and let them experience the best that this world has to offer. He protected them, fought battles for them, and provided for them. He dealt with them sternly when they insisted on turning their backs on Him. But He also relentlessly offered ways for His people to be reconciled with Him. And, of course, we see God's ultimate act of love for us when He died on the cross. He then gave us the Holy Spirit so that we would never have to walk alone. On the other hand, God was brutal to the enemies of His people. He brought plagues on them and ruined their cities. There was no mistaking whose side He was on.

Clearly, there are passages in scripture that tell us not everything in this life will be pleasant. Indeed, Jesus reminds us that in this life, there will be trials. (*John 16:33*) But He goes on to say that we can take heart because He has overcome the world, and so can we—through Him. This verse is often quoted to emphasize the first part – to serve as a Biblical declaration on the inevitability of suffering in a fallen world. But I believe that Jesus' tone is more empathetic and encouraging. He is saying, "Look, this life will be tough at times; I get it; the world is no longer the 'good' (*Genesis 1*) place that God created it to be. But take heart because I have paved the way for you to make it through, and I will walk with you all along the way." This verse, I believe, is God's consolation to us, not His warning.

We also have to consider the Biblical martyrs. Surely they were close to the heart of God, yet they suffered greatly. The Bible covers this, too. Scripture tells us that those who are persecuted for the Gospel will be rewarded accordingly. (*Matthew 5:10*) Remember that God's perspective is eternal. He assures us that, ultimately, none of our suffering will be in vain. Remember, too, that God is not responsible for our suffering. He does not mete out suffering to His people

just to show them who's God. Quite the contrary—He delights in blessing us. And He reserves a special blessing to bestow upon those who suffer for His Name in this broken world. (*Cf. Matthew 5:10-12*).

For most of my life, I expected God to deal with me in ways that are more consistent with the ways He deals with His enemies. But I am not God's enemy, and neither are you. We are God's children, His friends, and His precious creation. We are His chosen ones. If there's anything we need to get through our heads (and hearts) in order to make God happy, that's it. Expect great things from God, even in the midst of tough times. Read all scripture in the light of God's goodness and His desire to shower you with love. Remember who you are in Christ and all that God went through to reconcile you to Himself. I pray that as you do, the true character of God will shine even brighter in your eyes.

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If this article was meaningful to you in any way, I would like to hear about it. Please send any questions or comments to: heather@newmilkandhoney.com.