

A.D. Episode 7
The Dragon Dilemma
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*And we know that in **all things** God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be **conformed to the image of his Son**, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.*

INTRODUCTION

Good morning!

We are continuing our exploration of the Book of Acts and the new mini-series **A.D.** today. A prevailing theme in Acts, which is clear in **A.D.** and mirrors our own lives to a somewhat lesser degree, is the trials and tribulations that the Church experienced as they moved the gospel forward.

As we know, persecution for our faith hasn't gone away, but it *seems* far away to us in America.

Our persecution is usually pretty tame, a liberal movie or article, maybe an ACLU case, or a job promotion slight, but according to **Open Doors Ministries**, every month 322 Christians are killed, over 200 churches or properties destroyed, and over 700 acts of violence are committed against believers!

Persecution is real. Whether big or small, things don't always go smoothly for us, do they? We all experience trials on a daily basis to one degree or another.

This morning we're going to camp out on that word...trials. We all use it when circumstances go bad. Some are life threatening medical issues, stressful financial situations, or just aggravating scenarios that drive us to the point of despair.

Trials happen, but what exactly is a trial?

Well, that's *Christianese* for what an unbeliever would term a bummer, a hardship, or a difficulty. But our use of the word "trial" instead of a just a "bad thing" implies that there is more to it because of our faith. There is a purpose in it. It isn't just karma or fate. There is a reason behind it because we believe that God is sovereign.

We all need to be reminded of this simple truth. God is in control, even when it doesn't seem like it.

So let's define this simple word. A trial is "*the act of trying, a testing, or putting to the proof.*"

We use it in a courtroom setting. Someone is on trial and we are "trying" them to prove the truth. Or in an athletic event like the Olympics where several "trial" runs occur before the final championship race to eliminate those who are not ready. And we also use it in perfecting something, like a recipe where after several "trials" we make the perfect piecrust.

In all of these examples of the word trial we see that the purpose of the action of "trying" is to bring something or someone to perfection, to be the best, to be true. What is actually happening to us when we have trials, in a spiritual sense, is that our faith and character are being changed, tested, and transformed to make us more Christ-like.

Isn't that wonderful? Isn't that great? Aren't we blessed to be chosen to be transformed into Jesus' likeness?

No, it hurts.

Pressure, pain, squeezing, cutting, pruning, hacking, and tearing away our imperfections because of our sinful nature is hard, embarrassing, and even painful. Our patience is tested. Our faith is tested. Our character is tested. Of course, I'm being facetious to not like His tests because it is an honor to be changed by God through our trials, to be transformed.

But if we are honest...painful suffering still stinks...bad!

When discussing trials and spiritual change, C.S. Lewis always has good insight. Look at the first line of his book *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*:

"There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it."

What a great opening line! As good or better than Dickens or Melville.

So here is the scoop on Eustace. He's a real stinker, with a bad attitude, utterly selfish, and a genuine brat who ends up cursed and becomes a dragon!

Aslan, who is a magical lion thinly disguised as Jesus, cuts away the dragon's skin in a most painful process...but only after Eustace has been broken by his monstrous curse.

Now that Eustace is healed from being a dragon, and this is a self-portrait of all of us because of our sinful nature and just what trials (and repentance) means for us as believers, he is radically transformed.

The ugly scales drop off and a totally different person emerges. It hurts. It's painful. It's

ugly. But it results in a beautiful, new image for Eustace.

And so it is with trials for us.

God has a purpose in our trials.

Look at two verses on this important concept because what we are really asking is this question that unbelievers ask openly (and believers mumble in the hearts):

Why does an omnipotent God permit bad things to happen to good people?

Look what James says in his first chapter:

*Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face **trials** of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*

He is allowing it for our benefit to test our faith...to remind us that He is in control, loves us, and will use it for our best as a loving father to bring us to maturity. By faith, we acknowledge His sovereignty in our ultimate good that He will use it for His glory...to help us change.

Look at Peter's view on trials in his first chapter:

*In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of **trials**. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.*

They both say it's a joy to have trials.

Well, for the new believers in the Book of Acts trials weren't just running out of gas or spilling coffee in the car...they were intense. When Peter penned these words, Christians were dying at the hands of the Romans every day.

They experienced severe persecutions, to the point of death. We don't see that kind of opposition in America today, but we see on the news Christians being beheaded by radical Islamists. That makes the stoning of Stephen and other believers in Acts very real indeed...and should also put your American trials in some perspective.

MESSAGE

So when we consider the persecution in Acts, we have to ask why God allows us to suffer at all. Certainly the first century believers wondered why God wasn't protecting them.

Let's look at this question of pain and suffering more closely. There aren't easy answers, but there are answers.

For the sake of argument, we're going to put God, the eternal Judge, on trial. After all, we are accusing Him of allowing bad things to happen to everyone, right? He is failing to be omnipotent and protect us.

As audacious as that is, putting Him on trial, let's see how He measures up to cross-examination on why He allows suffering. We'll start by looking at a famous Old Testament example in Exodus 17:1-7,

*The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. So they **quarreled** with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink."*

*Moses replied, "Why do you **quarrel** with me? Why do you put the Lord to the **test**?" But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?"*

Then Moses cried out to the Lord, "What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me."

*The Lord answered Moses, "Go out in front of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. **I will stand there before you** by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink."*

*So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites **quarreled** and because they **tested** the Lord saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"*

Isn't this precisely what we say when God allows something unpleasant to happen in our lives—God is wrong! That's what we're really saying. Like Israel, we have indicted God. Do you see the irony of this mentality? Judging the Judge!

Verse 6 is especially important, "*I will **stand before** you....*"

That phrase means that "an inferior stands before a superior," like Esther stood before the King, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego stood before Nebuchadnezzar, or the Magi stood before Herod.

This is incredible...God is standing in the dock (an old English court term). God is facing the gallows! Look at C.S. Lewis again:

"The ancient man approached God as the accused person approaches his judge. For the

modern man, the roles are reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock... the trial may even end in God's acquittal. But the important thing is that Man is on the bench and God in the dock."

What audacity! How foolish to accuse God, or is He really guilty?

We'll take the question apart for a thorough examination in two sections.

Why does an omnipotent God permit bad things to happen to good people?

1. "Why does an omnipotent God permit bad things to happen..."

According to the Bible, we all know that God is perfect and holy. He never errs, is never surprised (God knows the punch line to every joke), is everywhere, and knows everything that is going to happen. He exists outside of time and knows our future, and therefore could protect us from tragedy...if He wants to do that.

Is this reasonable? That we should live in a Lollipop Land with blue skies and birds singing as they flutter past rainbows and butterflies and chocolate waterfalls? Our experience tells us this is not reality. Our world is dangerous.

What we are really suggesting though is this...we expect everything to be easy if a loving God is *really* in charge, right? He will protect us and save the helpless from harm. Is this what God does? We certainly *think* so. If He loves us, then He will make our life easy, right?

The answer is an unequivocal "No!"

Jesus made it clear that in our life we would have problems.

These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world (John 16:33).

God has permitted a broken world, one we damaged by our choice to sin, to affect us. Evil is obviously real, so why does He allow it? Why doesn't He stop it?

The truth is that we do not have all the answers, and it's okay to admit our ignorance on why some Tsunami hit or another senseless school shooting killed children.

We don't have all the answers.

But we can say that we live in a broken world, with broken people, who make broken choices. God has given us all the right, the freedom, to make those choices. It is the only way to have genuine love from someone. They must choose to love of their own accord or it is just a robotic action. We call that Free Will.

Nobody wants a lover who must stay against their will, right? God wants us to love Him because we want to love Him...we choose Him. He's given us freedom to choose.

So we do not know everything. And that's okay because God does, and we trust His judgment because He is righteous. His track record is clear that He is righteous and loves people.

For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways," declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right (Genesis 18:25)?

Let's sum up what we do know for sure from God's inspired Word:

- God's character is impeccable and good.
- He gave us the freedom to choose to love Him or reject Him.
- Our freedom means people make bad choices (sin) and suffering occurs.
- He allowed His only Son to die to bring us back from the separation sin caused.
- Despite forgiving us, sin still remains in our mortal body.
- He uses trials to transform us to be more like Him.
- Therefore, rejoice in your trials as they conform you to His image.
- Because it proves He loves you!

What does it mean that God allows pain, persecution, and trials to come into our lives? It means He cares. He cares so much about us that He is not willing to let us remain dragons like Eustace Clarence Scrubb.

A. W. Tozer said, *"It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until he has hurt him deeply."*

When we come to Jesus, we are forgiven and made new. As Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:17,

Therefore if any person is in Christ he is a new creation; the old has passed away. Behold, the fresh and new has come! (Amplified)

Although forgiven and changed, spiritually we are babes...with dirty, stinky, messy diapers. Our life is a crappy diaper.

Like Eustace Clarence Scrubb, we have emotional baggage, bad habits, selfish dispositions, and a lot to learn about being like Aslan.

God loves us too much to let us remain the way we are, and He uses trials to mature us.

And these trials hurt because they effect a change in us.

As Ken Hutcherson said, *"God is more concerned with your character than your*

comfort.”

2. “...to good people?”

Are we really good people? The Bible is clear that we are not good.

as it is written, "THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:10, 23).

And again, even if we were good, which we are not, a good person doesn't cut it when compared to a holy God, as Isaiah said in 59:2,

But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear.

And again in Isaiah 64:6,

For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; and all of us wither like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

Compared to Adolph Hitler, we're pretty good. Compared to Jesus Christ, we have all fallen short, and deserve to be punished by a righteous God for breaking His Laws. Our very best effort is a dirty diaper to God.

His grading standard is not a curve...it's perfection.

For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all (James 2:10).

Just one pin prick, one sin, breaks the balloon of His holy standard.

3. And let's not forget the one who is the ruler of this world...Satan.

2 Corinthians 4:4 says, “*in whose case **the god of this world** has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*”

Ephesians 2:2 says, “*...in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to **the prince of the power of the air**, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.*”

Satan is constantly at work in this world too. He hates us and Jesus and anything holy. He is a thief, bent on destruction, death, and lies that muddy the truth of God's goodness and love. Even putting God on trial smells like him, doesn't it?

APPLICATION

So what do we do with this?

Knowing that we live in a broken world that can hurt us, filled with broken people who can hurt us, ruled by an Satan who hates us, is it any wonder that we suffer? This is precisely why God invaded our world...to rescue us...to restore us...to bring us back to Himself...and take us to a new world where sin no longer rules.

Just as Peter said in 2 Peter 3:11-18,

Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat!

There is a new world coming for us and God is using our suffering here to conform us to His image as Paul said in Romans 8:28-29,

*And we know that in **all things** God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be **conformed to the image of his Son**, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.*

So because of His love for us, loving us too much to let us stay the way we are, but bent on helping us grow up to be like Him, embrace your trials with joy, just as James and Peter said.

See trials as an opportunity for a sovereign God to train you, to perfect your faith, to come through for you, to make you into His image. He is lovingly shaping your specific trials for your best interests.

He is a loving father who wants to protect you and provide for you. That should give you great joy the next time things fall apart. Make your first reaction thankfulness for His sovereign work in your life.

As Peter said in 1 Peter 4:12-19,

*Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to **test** you, as though something strange were happening to you. But **rejoice** inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.*

INVITATION / CLOSING

[optional: insert personal story]

So the question we need to answer today is this...do you want to remain a dragon, a monster like Eustace Clarence Scrubb? Or do you want to change, to accept the trials that God allows in your life to bring you closer to Him and transform you to be more like Him...with joy?

It will not be easy or fun, perhaps even devastating, but at the end of His pressure and heat process your heart of coal will become a heart of diamonds.

So let's remember the example of Exodus where God tested them through trials, and not be like Israel, "quarreling" with God's kind intentions. Incidentally, this word "quarrel" in the Hebrew is *RIB*, which carries a legal meaning, likened to "pleading your case, an indictment, or lawsuit." God was testing them...and they were accusing God, testing Him, "*You didn't provide for us, you didn't protect us, you aren't even present with us.*"

Let's look at two verses in closing:

Psalm 81:7

*In your distress you called and I rescued you, I answered you out of a thundercloud; I **tested** you at the waters of Meribah.*

God was patiently testing them there in Exodus 17, and even though he parted the Red Sea and freed them from Pharaoh, they forgot his kindnesses and accused Him, putting Him on trial as it says in Deuteronomy 6:16,

*Do not put the Lord your God to the **test** as you did at Massah.*

Do you believe God has your best interests at heart?

Do you believe He will use your trials to conform you to His image?

I pray that we would all rejoice with genuine joy at the trials that He has ordained for us for our good. As Paul said in 2 Corinthians 3:18, we "*are **being transformed** into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*"

Oh yeah...the verdict on God? Not guilty!

Let's pray.

