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## **UNDERSTANDING THE STATE OF A PERSON AND HOW HE IS FARING**

Very often, when asked the question, "How are you?" or "How are you getting on?", if our circumstances are comfortable and pleasant, we would answer, "I am fine". On the other hand, if our circumstances are adverse and we are in pain and suffering, we would answer, "Not good. Terrible."

Is this how we should view ourselves or other people? Why do we tend to respond in this way? What is the proper response to questions like these?

As I was thinking about these questions, I was reminded of an amusing incident. A Christian brother once asked another, "How are you?" Without much hesitation, the reply came, "It is *well with my soul*." When the first believer heard this unexpected reply, he thought it was a rather strange answer.

Although the reply was unexpected and sounded awkward, it is in fact more meaningful than the usual replies we receive because the second believer focused on what really counts—the state of his inner being rather than the outward circumstances.

In this eighth and final message, I will highlight some lessons we can learn from the story of Job pertaining to understanding the state of a person and how he is faring. I shall consider them in the following 12 points:

### **1. A person's circumstances do not determine how he fares**

The circumstances that Job was in do not tell us how he was faring, or whether God was pleased with him and approved of his life at that point in time.

When Job was severely afflicted, his friends and others around him believed that he must have done something wrong, and that he was faring badly. They were overly influenced by the adverse circumstances that came upon him. Job himself was also unduly disturbed by his afflictions.

Likewise, we are often overly influenced by considerations of outward circumstances in understanding how a person is faring. For example, when the person's life is plain sailing and his circumstances are favourable, we tend to think that he is faring well. On the other hand, when the person is assailed by many difficulties and afflictions, we tend to regard him as not faring well.

But the truth of the matter is that it is not the circumstances of a person that determine how he is faring but how he is responding. This leads me to the second point.

## **2. It is what goes on within a person that counts**

What counts is what went on within Job, including his heart, attitude and response before and during the trials. I said "before" the trials because it is also relevant to know what was within him then. What we should look for is the quality of his relationship with God, the kind of love he had for God, his faith and obedience towards God, and how God viewed him. These are the real issues rather than what came upon him.

In other words, the reality within a person as he goes through the circumstances is what counts rather than the circumstances themselves. We should also take care not to look merely at his outward conduct and response; otherwise we may have an inaccurate picture of the reality, unless the outward response reflects the inner reality. This leads me to the third point.

## **3. A change in outward manifestations does not mean there is an inward change**

The inward state of a person may be basically the same, but outwardly it may manifest itself in different forms and may appear rather different to other people in the many dynamic circumstances of life.

For example, even if the inward state of Job were not very different before and during the trials, outwardly we may see great variations in his conduct during the different periods because of the severity of the afflictions that came upon him. During the trials, we see that Job complained and made improper remarks about God. However, this may not be due to a significant change in Job's inward state during the trials. It is likely that there existed deficiencies within him before the trials, but they were not manifested until the trials came upon him. If we do not appreciate the nature and intensity of the difficulties that Job went through and the meaning of his response, his outward conduct may give the impression that he was faring very badly and that his inward state had deteriorated considerably.

On the other hand, we should also not conclude that Job's inward state was exactly the same before and during the trials. It could be different, depending on how Job went through the situations, what he focused on, and how he chose at that point in time.

## **4. Intense trials can be helpful experiences**

Many would regard intense sufferings and trials as very bad experiences. Many people reading the Book of Job would tend to have the feeling that Job went through a terrible time. But should we view such situations of life as very bad experiences? In reality, what Job went through was rather helpful, and God intended the trials to have positive results for Job himself and as opportunities for him to be a good testimony. James 5:11 seems to be speaking of God's intentions for Job through the trials.

**James 5:11**

We count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful.

James is referring to people who go through trials and sufferings well and are blessed. He highlights the example of Job and says, "You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome..." In the margin of the New American Standard Bible it is noted that "outcome of the Lord's dealings" literally means "end of the Lord". The Greek word translated here as "outcome" can also have the meaning "goal", that is, what James is saying here can also have the meaning "goal of the Lord". In allowing Job to go through various trials, God had a goal in mind, one that is consistent with His compassion and mercy. God was not merely letting Job go through a difficult time, but rather, He intended it for his good. However, if Job had responded poorly, God's good intentions would not have been realised.

Amid the trials and intense sufferings, Job did falter. But he did not go downhill all the way. He repented, learned from the experience and emerged a better person. Of course, it would have been better had he not faltered, but all things considered, the whole episode did not turn out detrimental to his life. And the summary of the apostle James on the outcome of the Lord's dealings with Job was that he was counted amongst those who endured and were blessed. He is an example of one to whom God showed compassion and mercy during times of trials and testing.

Thus it is important that we go through difficult situations well. They need not be a bad experience for us as God intends them for our good. Even if we do falter, it does not mean we will emerge poorer. If we repent, we can still learn precious lessons. Despite our weaknesses and failures, we know that we can still choose to respond well to God and be determined to be faithful to Him from that point on. This is a strong encouragement to us in our journey of faith.

Man's tendency is to focus on the outward circumstances and to view afflictions as bad experiences. This should not be the way we view life. Instead, we should be more concerned, whether for ourselves or for other people, with the inward being or the ultimate well-being of the person. If this is our focus, we will not conclude wrongly when we see someone going through suffering. Instead, we will be concerned about how he is going through it and what it means to his life in the ultimate sense, that is, in his inward being. This is how we should be looking at life's

situations and this is what God is really concerned about. This leads me to the next point.

### **5. Do not be unduly bothered by circumstances we go through**

I say "unduly bothered" because it does not mean that we ignore the circumstances. Yet we should not be preoccupied with them even if they are difficult and trying and seem to "hit" us from different directions.

*How we go through situations is more important than what we go through.* This is what we should concentrate on rather than allowing ourselves to be unduly disturbed by the difficult circumstances. However, we should ensure that what we go through is what God sees as appropriate for us. We must not venture into or remain in a situation that God does not desire us to be in.

For example, because of lack of wisdom, we might venture into a dangerous or unhealthy situation. If this were the case, it would be wrong to think that it is all right so long as we concentrate on how we go through it.

This is something we need to be prayerful about. Is the situation we are in one that the Lord wants us to be in? If it is, we should concentrate on going through it well; if it is not, we should come out of it.

Or, to put it in another form, *our well-being does not hinge on whether the situation or the circumstance we are in is easy or difficult, but on how well we go through it, so long as it is one that God desires us to be in.* This requires us to maintain good attitudes, look to the Lord for wisdom, guidance and enabling, and learn well what the Lord desires to teach us.

We should not waste our energy lamenting or allow ourselves to be weighed down and be discouraged by difficult circumstances. We should instead continually affirm in our hearts that God is sovereign and that He loves us and cares for us. Whatever the outward appearance and circumstance may be, God will cause all things to work together for good to those who love Him, to those who are called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28). As we seek to be faithful to God, we can affirm this truth, take heart and carry on with a positive attitude.

### **6. God considers all relevant factors when assessing how we fare**

In addition, it is also helpful for us to recognise that God gives allowance and He weighs and views us bearing in mind how difficult our circumstances are. Therefore, when we falter in the midst of difficulties, it does not necessarily mean that we are faring poorly. Neither should we think that if the situation were easier we would fare better.

We see this principle in operation in Job's life: that God still deeply appreciated him even though he faltered because, in view of the intensity of the trials, his failure was understandable though not excused. It is therefore inaccurate to conclude that he was in a bad spiritual state during the trials. In fact, his spiritual condition was better than those who despised, rejected and mocked him, and in comparison, many in similar straits would not have fared as well as him. This principle helps us understand why James referred to Job as an example of "those blessed who endured" despite his having faltered during the trials.

In our understanding of ourselves and of others, *we often deduce wrongly because we fail to bear in mind the many factors in operation*. And it is the operation of this principle that explains why two persons may outwardly appear to be faring similarly when in reality there is a significant difference in the quality of their lives and how they are faring. The circumstances they are in and the pressures upon them may be very different. The one who appears to be faring worse may in reality be faring better because his circumstances are more difficult. And sometimes the pressures upon a person may not be obvious or easily recognisable. Thus, we should learn to be slow to conclude.

### **7. Although the circumstances in a person's life do not determine how he fares, they are not irrelevant**

Understanding the circumstances a person is going through and why they are taking place can help us understand his state and how he is faring. Let me cite a few examples:

#### *a. Expression of God's displeasure*

Calamities that come upon a person may be an expression of God's displeasure with sins in his life or because of his refusal to repent. It is thus an expression of God's disciplining hand.

#### *b. Exposure of weaknesses in our lives*

On other occasions, God may allow afflictions or certain circumstances to come a person's way because of weaknesses in his life that the Lord desires to expose so that corrective measures can be taken.

#### *c. For positive development*

But at times it may not be negative features that the Lord is dealing with, but more that the Lord desires positive development in the person's life. In such a situation, the Lord may highlight certain areas in his life in a more obvious manner so that he can work hard at them.

#### *d. Learning various things*

It could also be that the Lord desires to teach us various things—understanding ourselves, developing our character, understanding people or the realities in the spiritual realm, that is, about God Himself, the principles in the spiritual realm, the powers of darkness, how they operate and how we can fight the good fight.

#### *Failing to learn*

If we are careless, we may not learn what God intends for us. We may go through various situations without much reflection or seeking the Lord or understanding what we can learn. For example, the Lord may allow the powers of darkness to afflict us so that we can understand their mode of operation, how to resist them and how to have a clearer understanding of the realities in the spiritual realm. However, if we are not prayerful and reflective, we may not realise that He desires to teach us these lessons in order that we may be properly equipped to be effective soldiers in God's army. So even if we look to the Lord for strength and grace to go through the situation, we may still fail to learn about the realities in the spiritual realm, spiritual warfare and how to fight the good fight of faith.

This is a very important point to take note of, that is, *the Lord desires to teach us much through life's experiences*, first for our own personal development, and then to be effective servants of the Lord. If we are walking with the Lord, we can view these situations as part of *His training programme* for us.

Thus, apart from maintaining healthy attitudes of not murmuring and of looking to the Lord for grace and strength, we should seek to understand what the Lord desires to teach us and what we can learn from the situations of life, including gaining a better understanding of ourselves and other people.

#### *Different levels of learning*

In trying to understand the meaning of what a person is going through and how he is faring, we should be slow to conclude, even if we can discern God's disciplining hand on his life. The reason is that there can be different levels of learning and development in different people's lives even for similar areas of truth.

For example, God may discipline a person in a particular area while He may appear to approve of it in the life of another. The second person may appear to be faring better than the first person in that area. In reality, the opposite may be true. The reason for this seeming incongruity is the difference in God's expectations of the two persons. The first person has attained a higher level of maturity and God expects more of him and does not accept the way he has been conducting himself in that area. But for the one who seems to be faring better, in reality he is not but God accepts his conduct at that point in time because of his lower level of maturity.

Our understanding of this area can help us appreciate God's stern rebuke of Job at the end of the episode and, at the same time, His commendation of him. The apparent discrepancy can be partially explained by the fact that in comparison with his three friends, Job was at a higher level of spiritual maturity and was faring better than them and so God commended him. However, God also rebuked Job sternly because He expected more from Job.

### **8. Some perplexing situations cannot be properly understood unless God enlightens**

In some perplexing situations especially those involving the spiritual realm, it is difficult to properly understand the meaning of what a person is going through unless God enlightens and reveals. For example, neither Job nor those around him understood the meaning of his suffering because they could not perceive what was happening in the spiritual realm. And they could not unless God revealed it to them. How could they when apparently they did not even know the existence of Satan? When they tried to reason out with their limited knowledge, wrong conclusions easily resulted. This was true not only of Job's three friends; even Job himself concluded wrongly about the meaning of his trials.

Thus, there are a few points for us to bear in mind:

- It is important that we seek to understand what is happening in the spiritual realm.
- We need to seek God's revelation and wisdom and not focus on the outward, superficial aspects of what is happening.
- At times, due to our own failure, we do not understand the meaning of perplexing occurrences. But at times, God in His wisdom chooses not to reveal to us at that point in time, or even later on.
- We must be careful not to draw wrong conclusions based on insufficient knowledge.

### **9. It is easy to draw wrong conclusions**

Even Job, who had an unusually high degree of godliness, could be so seriously misunderstood, despised and mocked by those around him. They concluded that he was a terrible sinner when they saw him being sorely afflicted. They held this view despite the fact that Job had lived many years prior to this "dark period" in his life, and those around him would have witnessed the life he lived, the values he held, and

how God greatly blessed him. In fact, they used to hold Job in high regard before the trials came upon him.

Let us therefore be on our guard, for we may make the same grave mistake of wrongly concluding about others especially in situations that are difficult to understand or when there are indications that complex underlying issues are involved. We must be careful not to jump to conclusions or be over-confident in our assessment of a person, his state and the meaning of what he is going through. We must be prudent with our comments about the person, either to others or to the person directly, as well as be careful with the counsel we may give. To wrong a person can be a serious matter. We should be prayerful in trying to understand what is going on and what approach we should take. At times, the best approach may be to keep silent or to just say some words of encouragement.

But having said this, it is helpful to note that not every situation of life is complex and difficult to understand. There are many situations that are obvious to those who are perceptive and prayerful. Let us therefore not be overcome by a sense of uncertainty and be paralysed into passivity for fear of making a wrong assessment of a situation or a person. If we are, we will become ineffective for the Lord.

### **10. We need to develop deep and genuine qualities within**

Having considered at length what Job had gone through, and the issue of appearance and reality, we must recognise the importance of developing deep and genuine qualities within and not be content with an outward appearance of having fared well.

Some appear to fare well because they are not facing significant adversities. Others appear to be getting on fine because they are avoiding hard and uncomfortable issues of life and in avoiding them, they compromise in the way they live their lives. They steer themselves away from the narrow path that God desires them to walk because they fear the pressures that might come upon them. Sadly, this is common among believers.

Our ultimate concern should not be to appear to fare well, but to ensure that genuine and deep qualities are being formed within us. If our attitudes are good and our hearts are earnest in seeking the Lord, even when we fail, He will help us to learn and grow in the process. We should therefore face the issues of life honestly instead of avoiding them or compromising the truth. Otherwise, the Lord will be displeased with us for not being true to Him and we will fail to live and learn as true children of God.

This is relevant at every stage of our lives. The basis for true quality service to God lies in the development of genuine qualities within. Without true qualities within, our service may appear to be good, but in reality, lacks real worth. Unless these deep qualities are formed within us, we will be incapable of attaining to the quality of being



that God intends for us and to the depth of relationship that God desires us to have with Him and with one another, which is important not only for now but also for eternity.

### **11. Appearance can be similar to or different from reality**

The story of Job illustrates that appearance can be similar to as well as different from reality. Before and after the trials, Job appeared to be faring well and many considered him to be so and he was. Thus, appearance and reality were similar during these two phases of his life.

However, during the trials, those around Job concluded that he was in a bad state because of the calamities that befell him. But they were wrong in that the calamities did not come upon him because he was in a bad state or that God was displeased with him. On the contrary, it was because God appreciated him that He allowed Satan to afflict him in that way. We've seen that even in relation to how Job conducted himself during the trials, though he did falter, taken as a whole, he was in a better state and faring better than those around him. But others concluded wrongly because they were merely looking at the outward appearance of things. Thus, during this phase of his life, the reality was rather different from the outward appearance of things.

### **12. Not sensing God's presence does not mean that God is absent**

Although Job did not sense God's presence and fellowship during the trials, God did not leave him to fend for himself. It might have appeared that way to Job. He tried to reach out to God, but felt He could not be found. In fact, as we have seen, Job thought God was against him, that he was God's target and that the afflictions of the evil one were arrows of God that came upon him (Job 7:20; 6:4).

Although he could not recognise God's presence and fellowship, in reality, God was sovereignly watching over him and was deeply concerned for him and his well-being and did not allow the evil one to go beyond what He had permitted. God deeply loved Job and was primarily concerned about his moral and spiritual development, but Job was not conscious of it.

When we go through life's situations, we should be primarily concerned about our inward state, our attitudes, and whether we are faithful to God. If our attitudes are good, even when God does not seem to be near, or does not answer our prayers the way we expect, we can be sure that He is deeply concerned for us as His children and is sovereignly watching over us, caring and providing for us, and ensuring that there will always be a way for us to respond triumphantly in the Lord Jesus Christ.

*Whatever our feelings and the outward appearance of things, we must act on the basis of our knowledge of who God is, His sovereignty, His love, His concern for us and His intentions for our lives.*

We should take pains to reflect on scriptural truths such that they become living truths and not mere words from the pages of a book. We need to ask the Spirit of God to make them real to us. We should exercise faith in God, in what is recorded in the Scriptures, and in what He has promised, rather than be subjective or allow ourselves to be adversely affected by the outward appearance of things that is contrary to reality. This is especially important during times of difficulty and perplexity.

### **Conclusion**

In this concluding message, we have reflected on lessons we can learn from Job's experiences on the subject of *Appearance and Reality* and in particular about understanding the state of a person and how he is faring.

Let us now spend some time to reflect over our lives. Are we preoccupied with the externals or are we concerned about the ultimate realities in our lives, in the lives of others and in the kingdom of God? Do we hastily conclude based on appearance? Do we know how to look to the Lord to perceive the realities in the spiritual realm concerning ourselves and others and whatever the Lord may desire to teach us through the situations we go through? Let us be deeply concerned with developing genuine and deep qualities within and not be content to simply appear to fare well.

Let us ask the Spirit of God to search our hearts to enable us to recognise our true state, our deficiencies and the lessons He desires to teach us. We need to learn these lessons well. Let us also confess our wrongdoings and weaknesses to the Lord that He may wash away our sins and help us overcome our weaknesses.

### **Questions for reflection and discussion**

1. What are the lessons we can learn from the story of Job concerning understanding the state of a person and how he is faring?
2. What can we learn with regards to the way God's children should view and approach the trials of life?

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