

Pastor Steven J. Cole  
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship  
123 S. Beaver St.  
Flagstaff, AZ 86001  
[www.fcfonline.org](http://www.fcfonline.org)

## A STRANGE REWARD FOR OBEDIENCE

2 Chronicles 32

By

Steven J. Cole

November 13, 1994

Copyright, 1994

November 13, 1994  
Kings of Judah Lesson 12

## A Strange Reward for Obedience 2 Chronicles 32

For centuries philosophers and theologians have wrestled with the problem of pain. Simply put, it is, "If God is both good and all-powerful, then why is there pain and suffering?" It seems that the existence of suffering either negates the love or the omnipotence of God. A decade ago, Rabbi Harold Kushner, who lost his own son in death, tried to answer the question in his best-selling book, *When Bad Things Happen To Good People*. His pathetic answer was that God is good, but He isn't quite strong enough to eradicate suffering. Others have denied God's goodness, concluding that He is a sadistic tyrant. Such a view hardly inspires trust and intimacy with God!

The problem, of course, is not merely philosophical, but deeply personal, since we all face repeated trials throughout life. It is essential, if we want to walk with God and grow in the Christian faith, that we understand and submit to God's perspective on "why bad things happen to good people."

While not giving a comprehensive answer, 2 Chronicles 32 addresses this problem. Consider the words of 31:20-21, summarizing the good king Hezekiah's life: He "... did what was good, right, and true before the Lord his God. And every work which he began in the service of the house of God in law and in commandment, seeking his God, he did with all his heart and prospered." You would expect the next verse to read, "After these acts of faithfulness, Hezekiah lived a long, happy, trouble-free life."

But instead we read, "After these acts of faithfulness Sennacherib king of Assyria came and invaded Judah and besieged the fortified cities, and thought to break into them for himself" (32:1). What a strange reward for Hezekiah's obedience! Why didn't God intervene to prevent this good king and his people from going through this difficult trial? Where was God in all this?

The answer to that question is implicit in verse 21, which records how an angel of the Lord destroyed the Assyrian army so that they did not conquer Jerusalem. The accounts in 2 Kings 18 and

Isaiah 37 report that 185,000 soldiers--more than three times the population of Flagstaff--were wiped out in one night! And to do the job, the Lord didn't bother to get off his throne. He didn't muster an army of 100,000 angels. He called *one* angel and said, "Go take care of Sennacherib's army." God just flicked the mighty Sennacherib out of the way like an ant. So the answer to the question, "Where was God when Sennacherib invaded Judah?" is obvious: God was sovereignly sitting upon His throne, observing every move of this proud king.

But that raises another question: Why didn't God send His angel to polish off Sennacherib's army *before* it caused all the problems for Hezekiah? If God could do it later, He just as easily could have done it sooner. Why did He allow the good king Hezekiah to experience the trauma of Sennacherib's invasion? More personally, why does God allow us to go through trials? Our text suggests four reasons:

1. God allows trials to motivate us to strengthen our defenses against evil.

When Hezekiah saw what was coming, he got his people busy getting prepared for the trial (32:1-6). They cut off and re-routed the water supply from the spring of Gihon outside the city wall. The water tunnel which Hezekiah's men built was discovered by archaeologists in 1880 and is an amazing engineering feat. They dug through solid limestone with hand tools, starting at opposite ends, 1700 feet apart. A plaque which was discovered describes how the workers finally were five feet from one another and could hear each others' voices. They chipped their way toward one another until the tunnel was completed and the water from the spring flowed into the city. The workers also repaired the broken walls and got the city fortified for the attack. There are two lessons here for us:

- A. The time to get ready for trials is before they hit, not after.

Proverbs 24: 10 states, "If you are slack in the day of distress, your strength is limited." In other words, the day of distress reveals your strength, not a day of calm. So you'd better use the present to prepare for the day of distress (see also, Prov. 1:24-29). You can count on it: At some point some Sennacherib will invade your life.

If you aren't sinking down roots with God now, you won't be able to stand against the storm.

B. Don't trust your preparations; trust the Lord.

(See Isa. 22:9-11.) Apparently some in Judah (in light of 2 Chron. 32:7-8, I don't think Hezekiah was included) were trusting in their water tunnel and fortifications, not in the Lord. That's always a danger. Preparation and planning are good, but we dare not trust in such things.

We all should develop a daily habit of spending time in God's Word and in prayer, fortifying our lives against the enemy. But we need to be on guard against trusting in our Bible knowledge or in our quiet times or in some method rather than in the Lord Himself. The enemy is subtle and will try to get us to trust in anything other than the living God. So the main goal of a daily time with God should be to walk in dependence on Him. Knowing that trials will come should motivate us to strengthen our defenses, putting on the full armor of God so that we're ready to stand in the day of trouble.

2. God allows trials to increase our trust in Him.

Trials will either strengthen your faith in God or destroy it. You won't stay in the same place. It's clear that there is a battle of faith going on here: Hezekiah called the people to trust God in this crisis (32:7-8); Sennacherib sought to undermine trust in God and in Hezekiah as God's leader (32:10-16). Scripture is clear that our main need in a time of trial is to rely on God alone and to resist the lies of the enemy.

Sennacherib and Satan have something in common: They're both tyrants. When you rebel against a tyrant, he visits you very quickly. Some new Christians get thrown by this. They put their trust in Christ and begin to cast off Satan's tyranny, and suddenly they have more problems than before they came to Christ. And they wail, "What happened?" It's easy: When you rebel against a tyrant, he visits you quickly. When you face a trial, Satan whispers, "If your God is so good and powerful, then why is this happening to you? I wouldn't call this good, would you? And your pastor tells you to trust in God? Come on! That's a trite phrase if I ever heard one!" But resisting Satan by trusting God is precisely what the Bi-

ble tells us to do when we face trials (see 1 Pet. 5:6-11). What does trust mean?

- A. Trust in God means submitting to His sovereignty over your trials.

You've only got two choices: Either God is sovereign over the likes of Sennacherib (or whatever your trial is named), or He was on vacation and this trial is going to alter His sovereign will. And if you conclude that God is sovereign over your trial, you've got two choices: Either you submit to His sovereign hand (1 Pet. 5:6-7), or you shake your fist at Him and sulk, "It's not fair! Is this the way You treat me after all I've done for You?" But there is no word of that with Hezekiah. Instead of complaining, he rallied the people to trust in God (32:7-8).

- B. Trust in God means acknowledging God as the source of your strength.

(See 32:7-8.) Trusting God isn't passive and vague; it's active and specific. Let's say you have some overwhelming problem. Believe me, Sennacherib and company were an overwhelming problem! Some bas-relief art recovered from the ruins of Nineveh depicts Sennacherib's siege of Lachish (32:9, about 30 miles southwest of Jerusalem). The soldiers are battering down the walls with huge war machines. A number of prisoners are impaled on poles. Others are being flayed alive, while some are bowing in obeisance before Sennacherib. If you were on this guy's hit list, you had a problem! Let's be honest--it's one thing to say we trust in the Lord, but it's altogether different thing to do it when guys like this are knocking on your door!

How do you do it? You line up your problem against the living God and every time you fear, you keep coming back to affirm your trust in God. We can't be sure, but Psalm 46 may have been written in this situation. It's a great affirmation of God as the source of strength:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, and though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains quake at its swelling pride. There is a river whose streams make glad

the city of God, the holy dwelling place of the Most High. God is in the midst of her, she will not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns. The nations made an uproar, the kingdoms tottered; He raised His voice, the earth melted. the Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold (Ps. 46:1-7).

Thus, trust in God means submitting to His sovereignty over your trials; it means acknowledging Him as the source of your strength.

C. Trust in God means casting your cares on Him through prayer for His glory.

(See 32:20.) The other accounts (2 Kings and Isaiah) record how Hezekiah took Sennacherib's threatening letter into the house of the Lord, spread it out before the Lord and prayed about it. The gist of his prayer wasn't, "God help us out of this trial so that we can be happy." Rather, it was, "Lord, deliver us so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone, O Lord, are God" (2 Kings 19: 14-19). As our text states, Sennacherib and his envoys "spoke of the God of Jerusalem as of the gods of the peoples of the earth, the work of men's hands" (32:19). God's honor was first in Hezekiah's mind, not just relief from his problems.

When you pray in a time of trial--whether for yourself or for others--make sure that God's glory is the object of your prayer. The point of prayer is *not* to use God to secure my happiness. I need to seek God's glory above all else. He may be glorified by delivering me from my trial, or through my enduring the trial by His grace, or by taking me to be with Him. I need to trust Him by casting all my anxiety on Him, submitting to whatever brings Him glory (1 Pet. 5:7).

God allows trials to motivate us to strengthen our defenses against evil and to increase our trust in Him.

3. God allows trials to enrich our experience of His salvation.

(See 32:22.) Israel went to bed (if they slept at all), on the brink of annihilation, surrounded by 185,000 Assyrian soldiers. They got up the next morning surrounded by 185,000 Assyrian corpses. Can you imagine the relief and joy that must have spread

through the city that morning! "Have you heard the good news? God rescued us!" Those people were thankful to God!

One reason many, especially those reared in Christian homes, have a lukewarm faith and are not grateful to God is that they have never seen what a horrible fate God rescued them from when He saved them from His certain judgment. I like the way Harry Blamires puts it in his book, *Recovering the Christian Mind* [IVP], pp. 16):

What is the experience of conversion like? Is it like opening a book one day and saying, "Ah, now I understand: in future I shall guide my life by these precepts"? It is not. If the men and women of true faith are to be trusted, the relief felt after conversion is the relief of someone who has been saved from drowning, spotted struggling in the sea, winched up on to a helicopter and laid panting there. The convert does not speak as though he has achieved something, mastered some difficult truth at last, solved some problem, attained some new insight. He speaks as one torn from the bowels of destruction by the watchfulness, the care, the unspeakable love of a Saviour. His emotions are of relief, gratitude, and complete self-commitment to the One to whom he owes everything.

Our problem is, our proud fallen nature makes us think that we're capable of handling things by ourselves, whether it's getting into heaven by our own goodness or dealing with trials by our own ingenuity. So God has to humble us, to make us despair even of life, as the apostle Paul put it, so that "we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead" (2 Cor. 1:9). Then when He delivers us, we rejoice in His salvation!

God allows trials to motivate us to strengthen our defenses against evil; to increase our trust in Him; to enrich our experience of His salvation.

#### 4. God allows trials to humble us under His mighty hand.

The major sin of the human race is pride. It reared its head in a good man like Hezekiah when he gave "no return" when the Lord healed him from a terminal illness (32:25). Later, when some Babylonian envoys came to inquire of the miraculous sign God had performed of making the shadow go backwards on the stairs,

rather than bearing witness of the great God who did such a thing, Hezekiah boastfully showed them all of his riches (32:31). If a good man like Hezekiah (31:20) fell into pride, none of us are exempt from the problem. God has to send trials to remind us that even good people are not essentially good.

When trials hit a “good” person, we’re inclined to ask, “If God is all loving and all powerful, then why does a good man like this suffer?” We begin to think that good people have some sort of claim on God due to their goodness. But we need to remember that when we talk about a good person, we’re talking only from a human perspective. Only God is truly good. God’s perspective on the human race is: “There is none righteous, not even one. There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God. All have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good; there is not even one” (Rom. 3:10-12).

When I start thinking that God owes me a trouble-free life because of my uprightness, I had better start thinking differently. God owes me nothing but hell for my sin. The question, “God, how can You allow this to happen?” is the wrong question. The right question is, “God why have You not blotted me off the face of the earth for my sins? Even though in the sight of men I may be a good person, in Your holy presence I am full of all uncleanness and deserve only Your judgment.”

That’s a healthy and helpful reminder. It humbles our pride. God allows trials to remind us that even good people are not essentially good. We all need His grace or we would rightfully perish. None can demand His blessing as a wage due.

### Conclusion

So our text is telling us that ...

God allows trials to bless sinners who  
cast themselves on Him.

Trials motivate us to strengthen our defenses against evil. They increase our trust in God. They enrich our experience of His salvation. They humble us before Him, thus making us appreciate His abundant grace.

The following incident happened at a class in New York City called "Family Folklore: Preserving the stories of the past" (*Reader's Digest* [Jan., 1984], pp. 127-128):

A small, middle-aged woman stood and began speaking somewhat nervously. "I was born in Estonia," she said. "And I have never told anyone this story until now." She looked about hesitantly. Then she began to describe how, when she was a child, her parents had given her a beautiful doll from France. Cherie, she had called the doll. It became her most precious possession. Her cousin Doris came to stay with her when she was 12, after Doris's father died. Doris played with Cherie constantly, and when it was time to leave, she clutched Cherie to her. "Doris has lost her father, and she needs the doll more than you do," the 12-year-old's mother had said. "Let Doris have it. God will return it to you."

"I cried and cried," the woman said. "As time went by, and Cherie was not returned, I lost my faith in God." It was a harrowing time. "This was when we had to flee Estonia because of the Nazis," she said. She learned that Doris's house had been bombed by the Luftwaffe and had burned to the ground. Doris and her family escaped from the house with only the clothes on their backs. Soon all the relatives fled Estonia. Those who did not die in the Holocaust were widely scattered and started their lives again in new lands.

Eventually, the woman said, she found her way to the United States. Years went by, but she never forgot Cherie. Then, to her surprise, she learned that Doris was alive--and also living in America. Their paths crossed once or twice. But neither cousin ever mentioned the doll.

"When my first child was born," she said, "Doris came to visit. She brought with her a present." The woman struggled with tears. "It was Cherie. Doris told me that when she ran from the burning house, she put Cherie in her kerchief. She carried Cherie all through the war.

"If you think I wept before," the woman continued, "it was nothing to the tears I wept when I saw Cherie. And then

my faith in God was restored. For what my mother had said was true.”

Perhaps God has given you what you consider a strange reward for your obedience to Him. Some Sennacherib has invaded your life. Will you trust Him that in His time, if not in this life then in eternity, He will work it all together for good? If you cast yourself on Him, submitting to His sovereign hand, He will use such trials to shape you into the image of His Son, who learned obedience through the things He suffered (Heb. 5:8).

### Discussion Questions

1. Does God send trials or merely permit them? Does it make any difference? Can Satan cause trials apart from God’s permission?
2. One grateful reader of Rabbi Kushner’s book wrote to him, “Maybe now I can believe in a more realistic God.” How would you respond that comment?
3. Why is humility an essential part of enduring trials (see 1 Pet. 5:6-11)?
4. What is the biblical answer to the critic’s taunt, “If God loved you and is able, He would spare you from terrible trials”?

Copyright 1994, Steven J. Cole, All Rights Reserved.