

A Strange Reward for Faithfulness

Sermon by Stephen Judd

About 700 years before the birth of Christ, the Assyrian army, led by the fearsome commander Sennacherib, waged war against Judah. Relentlessly, Sennacherib's forces devastated cities from Sidon to Phoenicia and conquered the heights of Lebanon. Marching along riverbanks, their unstoppable wrath led to the fall of every fortified city, leaving only Jerusalem standing.

As the Assyrians encircled and besieged the city, the sight was formidable: soldiers in scarlet armor under the glaring sun, with chariots and horses crowding the ravines, ready to seize the holy city. Inside the walls of Jerusalem, King Hezekiah stood resolute. A leader devoted to God; he was committed to bringing revival to his land.

With a heart full of faith, Hezekiah sought the Lord, pleading for his people and for the preservation of God's promise. Hezekiah's life serves as a shining example of faithfulness to the Lord. Yet, despite his unwavering commitment and fervent prayers, God allowed this powerful adversary to come against him.

The Scriptural account in 2 Chronicles 31:20-21 highlights Hezekiah's dedication:

"Thus Hezekiah did throughout all Judah, and he did what was good and right and true before the Lord his God. And in every work that he began in the service of the house of God, in the law and in the commandment, to seek his God, he did it with all his heart. So he prospered."

The word *true* here literally means "faithful."

The NIV captures it well:

"This is what Hezekiah did throughout Judah, doing what was good and right and faithful before the Lord his God."

Take notice that Hezekiah was faithful to the Lord and obedient to His Word. And yet, despite this, the very next verse reveals a shocking development:

"After these deeds of faithfulness, Sennacherib king of Assyria came and entered Judah; he encamped against the fortified cities, thinking to win them over to himself" (2 Chronicles 32:1).

The way the Scripture reads, it appears as though the coming of the enemy is directly tied to Hezekiah's faithfulness to God. The correlation is clear. Often, our faith is tested—not in seasons of spiritual neglect, but in seasons of deep devotion.

The passage teaches us the powerful truth that a faith that cannot be tested cannot be trusted. God sometimes permits challenges to arise, not as a punishment but as a test of our trust in Him.

It would have been easy for Hezekiah to question why God allowed this trial, especially after his steadfast obedience. Yet, Hezekiah's response is a testament to his faith. He did not waver. Instead, he took his fears to the Lord, demonstrating that true faith is not the absence of trials but the presence of trust—even in the face of overwhelming odds.

Just as Hezekiah sought the Lord with all his heart, we too are reminded that God sees our faithfulness. When trials come, we can take comfort in knowing that God is with us, refining our faith and drawing us closer to Him.

Could it be that this story resonates with your own experience? Perhaps you've held on, stood for what is right, and made a commitment to God. You've done your best to please the Lord, yet you've encountered difficulty, sickness, or pain. It can feel as if a modern-day Sennacherib—a relentless force—is threatening to overwhelm you.

In those moments, it's natural to wonder, "Why, God? Why is this happening when I'm trying to live faithfully for You?"

The enemy may have you surrounded, but God is surrounding your enemy. God's got this! Hold on to the promises of God. Your faithfulness is not in vain. Though the battle is real, so is your God. He is mighty to save and stands with you in the midst of the fight.

When Sennacherib comes against you, you're not alone. The story of Hezekiah mirrors the experiences of countless Biblical characters and faithful saints who have faced their own "Sennacherib."

Take Job, for example. A man of integrity, upright in all his ways—honoring God with his life. Yet, he lost his health, his children, and his wealth. Job stood amidst unimaginable grief, unable to see beyond the tops of ten tombstones. Fire fell from heaven, consuming everything he had, and leaving him stripped of all earthly blessings. Surrounded by tragedy on every side, the enemy laughed in triumph. Sennacherib had come.

For Job, this overwhelming suffering must have seemed a strange reward for his unwavering faithfulness.

And then there's Paul. The great apostle who fearlessly preached the Gospel, fought the good fight of faith, and obediently followed the heavenly vision. This man, who penned half of the New Testament, faced shipwrecks, beatings, and constant danger. Ultimately, he found himself confined to a Roman dungeon, destined to die a martyr's death.

By human reasoning, such suffering seems like a strange reward for a life marked by such dedication to God.

These stories remind us of an essential truth—faithfulness does not guarantee an easy path. The enemy often surrounds us, challenges arise, and trials abound. Yet, through it all, God remains present and faithful.

Just as He stood with Job in his despair and Paul in his imprisonment, He is with you—in every storm, every trial, and every moment when the odds seem insurmountably stacked against you.

So take heart. When Sennacherib comes against you, remember—you are not alone.

One of the great unsolved mysteries of life is why good people suffer. We all know individuals—those who seem to have lived "storybook" lives. These are people who have never walked righteously before God or acted with integrity toward others. Yet, they seem to glide through life untouched by the troubles that plague so many.

Does it ever seem unreasonable to you that the best people often suffer the most?

When calamity strikes the godless, it's easier to understand. Scripture even supports the idea that the wicked will reap what they sow. When tragedy strikes a wicked community, we might even be tempted to say, "Well, they had it coming."

But what about when trouble strikes the righteous? How do we reconcile the suffering of good men and women—people of faith and integrity—while the ungodly seem to thrive?

This paradox has always puzzled me—the idea that faithful people can face so much trouble while bad men often prosper.

Explaining why trouble comes to good people is like trying to divide six into fourteen. You can divide six into most of fourteen, but not all of it. So, you add a decimal point and divide again, and again, and again. No matter how long you work on it, you'll always end up with a fraction—never a complete answer.

Likewise, no matter how much we analyze or try to make sense of it, there will always be a mystery left over when it comes to the suffering of the righteous. It's a question with no neat answer.

But one thing is clear, a good person's goodness does not lift them out of the ordinary experiences and challenges of life. Christians are not exempt from trouble!

Jesus Himself reminded us of this in Matthew 5:45:

"...for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust."

And in John 16:33, He offers both caution and hope:

“These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”

Jesus wasn't just speaking here of the end times or the distant future. He was saying that here—in this life, even now—we will face trials and tribulations. Most certainly, the enemy will come against us. But we can find peace in knowing that He has overcome the world.

We may not have all the answers, but we have the assurance that we are not alone—and that is more than enough.

As Holy Ghost-filled children of God, we stand on the promise that, *“Greater is He that is in you, than he that is in the world!”*

Isaiah prophesied in Isaiah 59:19:

“When the enemy comes in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord will lift up a standard against him.”

Interestingly, in the original text, the punctuation is misplaced. The comma should actually come after “When the enemy comes in,” making the verse read:

“When the enemy comes in, LIKE A FLOOD...the Spirit of the Lord will lift up a standard.”

Consider how some translations emphasize this:

“The Lord will come quickly like a fast-flowing river, driven by the breath of the Lord.” – New Century Version

“For He will come like a raging flood tide.” – New Living Translation

You talk about a surge—a flash flood of divine power and deliverance!

No matter what comes against us, we can stand in faith, knowing that God will always raise a standard for His people. In every trial, we have the assurance of His overwhelming, unstoppable power.

Jesus' words in Matthew 7:24-27 resonate with profound truth:

*“Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock:
And the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock.”*

*“But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand:
And the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall.”*

In this parable, the description of events is identical for both the wise and foolish builders. Jesus didn't describe a different set of circumstances for the two.

The rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on both houses—equally, relentlessly. The storm made no distinction. It was no respecter of persons.

So, what was the difference? It wasn't the intensity of the storm; it was the strength of the foundation. The house that stood firm was built on the rock.

The Sennacheribs of life will come. Storms will beat against us. Challenges will test the integrity of our lives. But here's the promise: If your foundation is on the Rock, your house will stand.

When the rains fall, the floods rise, and the winds beat against your life, remember where your foundation lies. If it is on Christ, you may bend, but you will not break. You may feel the pressure, but you will not fall. Because your life is anchored in Jesus.

As the timeless hymn reminds us: “On Christ the solid Rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand.”

As a child of God, you can be in the very center of His will and still experience sickness, pain, and sorrow. Walking through fiery trials does not mean you are outside of His favor. Don't let the enemy convince you otherwise.

For Hezekiah, the arrival of Sennacherib was not a punishment but, in a sense, the reward of his faithfulness. Sometimes, the trials we face are not signs of God's absence but rather proof of His refining presence.

It's a hard truth, but it's also a reminder: being a follower of Christ means bearing a cross, not avoiding one.

Our struggles and moments of vulnerability remind us of our deep need for Him. They draw us to the feet of the One who heals, comforts, and sustains us through every season.

We all seek answers—reasons and explanations for our suffering, losses, and pain. But God doesn't always explain the “why.”

The apostle Paul reminds us in Romans 11:33:

“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out.”

Or, as the NIV puts it:

“His paths beyond tracing out!”

Someone once said, “When we cannot trace His hand, we can trust His heart.”

We may never have all the answers, and perhaps that’s not what matters most. I’m convinced that God is less concerned with giving us explanations and more focused on offering us revelation.

The apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:12:

“For now we see through a glass, darkly...”

And in 1 Corinthians 2:9:

“Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him.”

God wants us to know Him, to trust Him, and to find peace in His presence—even when life’s mysteries remain unsolved. Faith does not require every answer; it requires trust.

When we walk with God, we learn that: His presence is better than any explanation. His comfort is greater than any reason. His wisdom surpasses all understanding.

So when trials come, rest in the assurance that even when you cannot see the full picture, the heart of God is always for you.

When bad things happen, we often find ourselves saying things like: “Well, God has His reasons,” or “There’s a reason for everything.”

We mean well when we say these things. We’re simply trying to make sense of what’s happened, to justify it, so we can live with it all. But a reason for everything? I’m not so sure about that.

A reason implies a simple cause-and-effect relationship. It suggests an underlying motive that logically justifies every event, making it good, worthwhile, and significant in some immediate way.

We often say, “Things don’t just happen; they’re done for a reason.” But is that really true in every case? When it comes to life’s deeper, more painful experiences, I prefer to talk about purpose rather than reason. Here’s why...

Reason focuses on the isolated circumstance, but purpose looks at the big picture—what God is doing in the broader story of our lives. Reason is fixated on the present, but purpose looks to the future outcomes and eternal significance that only God can see. Reason insists on an explanation, saying, “Tell me why,” but purpose whispers, “Trust Me, and let’s move forward.” Reason hangs on to the situation, trying to dissect it for meaning, while purpose holds on to God, trusting that He is at work in all things, even when we don’t fully understand.

We are all familiar with Romans 8:28:

“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”

Notice what this verse doesn’t say. It doesn’t say that everything that happens is good. It doesn’t even say that all things on their own work together for good. And it certainly doesn’t say that God causes all things to happen.

What it does say is that God works in all things—good and bad—to accomplish His purpose. He is present in every situation, shaping and guiding us toward His divine plan.

As the song says, “Even when we don’t see it, He’s working. Even when we can’t feel it, He’s working. He never stops. He never stops working!”

Sometimes, things happen in our lives that are undeniably bad—loss, heartache, and suffering. But God, in His infinite wisdom, takes even the broken pieces and weaves them into something beautiful. He transforms pain into purpose and trials into triumph.

Consider Joseph, who told his brothers in Genesis 50:20:

“What the enemy meant for evil, God meant it for good.”

Or Jesus, when the disciples questioned Him about the man born blind in John 9:2-3:

“Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

Jesus replied,

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him.”

In other words, sometimes things happen—not because of a specific reason, but so that God’s purpose can be revealed.

The greatest part of it all is that God's purpose will be accomplished. Nothing can stop it. Despite Satan's schemes. Despite the unpredictability of this world. Despite our own mistakes and human frailty.

God's purpose will prevail. As Paul wrote in Romans 8:35-39:

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us."

You may be going through the trial of your life today, but that doesn't mean you are defeated. Put your trust and confidence in the One who works all things together for good. Even when life doesn't make sense, you can rest in the assurance that God's purpose will prevail.

Life often presents us with questions that defy understanding. It's essential to reserve a space in our minds labeled, "Things I Don't Understand." Not everything in life is meant to make sense from our limited perspective.

Paul, in Romans 8:28, wrote:

"And we know that all things work together for good..."

Notice that he said: "We know." He didn't say, "We understand."

Sometimes, our lives resemble the wrong side of a tapestry—threads tangled; colors confused. Have you ever looked at the back of a carefully woven piece? It seems chaotic, even meaningless. Yet, when you see the correct side, the artistry is undeniable.

From God's perspective, the design is intelligent. The colors are harmonious. The picture is clear and beautiful.

Scripture declares that God sees the end from the beginning. While we only see fragments, He sees the whole masterpiece.

Have you ever worked on a challenging 5,000-piece jigsaw puzzle?

At first glance, the scattered pieces seem unrelated. You may even pick up a single piece and think, "This doesn't belong." But as the puzzle comes together, the beauty of the completed picture emerges.

That's what God sees—all the time. He knows how each piece fits into His perfect design.

As Christians, we are not immune to unanswerable questions. In fact, the very nature of faith invites us to embrace the unknown. Perhaps that's why it's called "the faith." If we had all the answers—if we could control, understand, and grasp everything—there would be no need for faith. True faith is not just believing when circumstances align with our desires. It takes greater faith to trust God when life doesn't make sense, when adversity surrounds us, and when answers are nowhere to be found.

Real faith is authenticated when we trust God without a plausible explanation, resting in His sovereignty despite our limited understanding.

1 John 5:4 declares:

"For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith."

We don't get a complete answer sheet to the quiz of life. It's okay to ask questions and wrestle with mysteries. But ultimately, we find peace when we rest in the arms of the One who holds the answers.

Today, I urge you to rest in the Lord. Put your confidence in Him, knowing that He is faithful, even in the mysteries. Trust Him with the pieces you don't yet understand, for He holds the complete picture.

Faith reminds us that we don't have to see the whole masterpiece to trust the Artist.

A tourist visiting Brussels was eager to witness how some of the world's finest lace is made. His guide led him to a modest building and down into a basement workroom.

The only light in the basement came from several narrow windows near the top of the exterior wall, just above street level. Daylight filtered through these windows, faintly illuminating the intricate lace patterns taped to the glass.

The workers sat at tables facing the windows, weaving lace in relative darkness. Puzzled by the dim conditions, the visitor asked, "Why is there so little light?"

The guide replied, "Centuries of experience have taught us that the finest lace is produced when the workers themselves are in the dark, but the pattern is in the light."

Have you ever felt like you were in the dark, longing for answers, wishing for just a little more light to illuminate your path?

We all go through times when a bit of explanation would seem to make the journey easier. Yet, in those moments, it's crucial to remember this—the pattern is in the light.

God's design and purpose are illuminated by His wisdom, even when we are working in the shadows. And it's a pattern that has stood the test of time and countless human questions.

When we don't understand, we can place our confidence in Him, knowing that He holds the complete design.

Isaiah 45:3 reminds us:

"I will give you the treasures of darkness and hidden riches of secret places, That you may know that I, the Lord, who call you by your name, am the God of Israel."

There are spiritual blessings and rewards that God bestows only on those who remain faithful, even in the darkest and most challenging times.

So, when you find yourself working in the dark, keep your eyes fixed on the pattern, anchored in the light of God's truth. Rest in the knowledge that He is weaving something beautiful, even if the full picture isn't clear yet. Trust that His hands are guiding every thread, every moment, for a purpose far beyond our understanding.

God's plan is perfect, even when we can't see it clearly. The dark seasons of life are often where His most exquisite designs come to life.

In closing, as Paul Harvey used to say, "And now for the rest of the story!"

The coming of Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, will either bring out the best or the worst in us. So, let's look at how Hezekiah responded when Sennacherib came against him.

When faced with Sennacherib's threats, Hezekiah took decisive action: He sought wise counsel from his princes and leaders. He stopped the springs of Siloam and diverted the waters of Kidron. He fortified the walls, rebuilt the towers, and prepared shields and darts. He gathered and organized the army. And he encouraged the people with words of faith:

"Be strong and courageous; do not be afraid nor dismayed before the king of Assyria, nor before all the multitude that is with him; for there are more with us than with him. With him is an arm of flesh; but with us is the Lord our God, to help us and to fight our battles" (2 Chronicles 32:7-8).

These words strengthened the people's resolve. The crisis didn't weaken Hezekiah—it stirred him and the people to rise to their best effort.

A little boy once led his sister up a rocky path. She complained, "But it's so rocky and bumpy!" He replied, "Sure, but the rocks are what you climb on."

Trials in life can become either stumbling blocks or steppingstones, depending on how we respond.

Consider Job, who worshiped the Lord amid great suffering:

“But He knows the way that I take; when He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold” (Job 23:10).

“The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21).

In his brokenness, Job clung to the only thing he had left, his worship. Worship became the healing medicine for his soul, removing the poison of despair and replacing it with grace.

After taking all practical steps, Hezekiah turned to the most important action: prayer.

“Now because of this King Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah, the son of Amoz, prayed and cried out to heaven. Then the Lord sent an angel who cut down every mighty man of valor, leader, and captain in the camp of the king of Assyria. So he returned shamefaced to his own land” (Hezekiah 32:20-21).

God answered their prayer by sending an angel to destroy the Assyrian army. Sennacherib returned home in disgrace, where his own sons killed him.

So, when Sennacherib comes, do everything you can. Strengthen your walls. Fortify your city. Put forth your best effort. But above all, go to your knees in prayer. When we do what we can, God will do what we cannot.

How far would we be from God if not for the troubles that drive us to Him? Often, it's the storms and challenges that bring us back to the shoreline of His grace.

A little boy once lost his toy boat on a pond. A bully threw rocks, creating waves that gently brought the boat back to him. The “rocks” in our lives may feel like attacks, but they can also be God's way of nudging us back to His side.

As Andraé Crouch's song reminds us: *“If I never had a problem, how would I know that He could solve them?”*

Problems lead us to the point where we ask, “Where could I go but to the Lord?”

The old song says:

*Where could I go? Where could I go?
Seeking a refuge for my soul,*

*Needing a friend to help me in the end,
Where could I go but to the Lord?*

Anything that drives us to His side is a blessing in disguise. Welcome the winds of adversity, for they propel you into the arms of the Savior.

When you feel surrounded, know that He is with you. Just ask the three Hebrew children, who found Him as the Fourth Man in the fire. It's in the furnace that you'll meet Jesus like never before.

Trust in Him, rest in His love, and take heart. He is faithful and will be with you through every trial—turning even the darkest moments into steppingstones to glory.