

What happens in a system of complex, interworking parts when one of those pieces isn't working exactly as it should? Maybe the mold was off a bit on that one. Maybe that person isn't quite doing what is expected of them. Whatever the system, whatever the issue, what happens? Trouble. That one part that's just a little off affects the entire work. And it causes problems. Might be a minor issue, some extra friction or noise, maybe a little delay. Or it might bring the entire operation crashing down all at once.

On a much larger scale, this is the case for our lives in this world, and really for the world itself. God created this world with a perfect design. Everything functioned well and in perfect harmony. And human beings were created in the image of God. They were holy. That is to say they expressed perfect selfless love consistently towards their God and each other. The system worked, it was flawless.

And then we wrecked it. Sin entered the world. We throw that word around a lot, it's probably our favorite term to describe how we are not what God intended. God himself uses any number of terms in scripture to describe our fallen state, but "sin" is the one we keep coming back to. It's fitting, of course. "Sin" means literally "to miss the mark", as though we were aiming for a target and no matter how we try, we consistently miss the bulls-eye. To return to our original picture, we are no longer functioning exactly as intended in the system God created. Doesn't matter how much we are off by, the fact is we're not what we should be. And now, figure out exactly what it would mean that in the entire system of creation that God designed, not one single part is doing exactly what it was meant to anymore. Everything is affected by sin, every single part is off. That can only mean one thing: trouble.

Let the truth of how our world functions sink in for a second and then ask yourself, is it really any surprise then what we see in our world or in our daily lives? No, of course not. What is actually surprising is that things aren't worse than they are. With as "off" and corrupted as every part is, you'd think we'd have spun out of control long ago. By the grace of God's influence in this world that has not happened. But the effects still are there. When we understand the broken principle on which our lives and world function, one thing is completely certain: we're going to have trouble.

Bad things will happen to us. We, personally, will and have likely caused ourselves trouble by our actions. Others will bring trouble down on us by their actions. Our own bodies will fail us and rebel against us. Our situations in life will range from the irritating and obnoxious to full-blown pains and daily struggles just to endure. Trouble will find you and trouble will not stop. The question is; how will you respond? How do you respond? Some of us are fighters. Something goes wrong and we leap into action to fix it. We quickly formulate a plan of attack and we're off and running to put that plan in motion. We can't rest until we've set it right and returned our lives to that "normal" state we think it should have.

But if that is our default reaction, do you see the problems with that? For one, that will not end. You can't restore your life to normal because there is no normal. You are filled with sin. Your life is permeated with sin. You miss the mark. And there will always be trouble. If this is your goal, if this is your reason for attacking trouble, you will be chasing this carrot all your days. Maybe you can keep it up. But more than likely you're going to either run out of steam or you're going to run face-first into the wall of a problem you can't fix. Some utterly devastating problem that there is no solution for. Some loss that you can't re-fill. An irreversible health condition. And when that happens, you're just as likely to slide into the other potential reactions to any kind of trouble – anger or despair.

Some people jump right to this point when trouble comes. After all, what's usually left when you can't do anything about your troubles or at least feel like you can't? Moping. Complaining. Whining. Anger. "This went wrong this week." "I can't do this like I used to." "So terrible what's going on in this country or on the other side of the world." "It's too hot, it's too cold, it's too wet, it's too loud." "I don't deserve this." "My life is terrible!" Sound familiar? Nobody likes a complainer, and yet we all end up doing it. And ironically, complaining about our troubles not only doesn't help, it usually amplifies them and in some cases multiplies them.

So what's left? We can't fix them all. And even just being upset about them only tends to make things worse. So what, then? What is left is to listen to the voice of your Lord. To let him help us step aside, step outside our lives, step up a bit to God's perspective and consider. These troubles are a blessing to you. What? Yes. The aches, the pains, the headaches, the heartaches, the broken and failing selves, the finances, the decaying buildings and toys. All of these are blessings that we should receive from the hand of our Father with gratitude, not complaints.

Consider again the words of Isaiah the prophet that we read: <Read text: Isaiah 35:4-7a>. This all sounds good at first, right? God says be strong, don't be afraid. He's coming to save you! And all these problems, all these physical difficulties we deal with, he's going to fix all of them completely! It sounds wonderful, something to totally look forward to, a great message of comfort!

Except when you read a little more carefully. Did you see how God was coming? He's coming with vengeance. With divine retribution. That sounds...less good. After all, remember why we have all these troubles in the first place? Because of sin.

Because you missed the mark. In God's setup there is no middle ground. There are no shades of gray. Either something is good, holy, perfect and loving or it is evil. All our sin is evil. It is all uncalled for. And it all calls for punishment. If God is coming with retribution, then we should expect to bear the brunt of that punishment. Do you see that every trouble you endure is merely a symptom of the real trouble? As we said, your troubles are all a result of you not working like you should, because you "miss the mark". Every trouble is a result of sin and so every one of them points back to your sinfulness, and how that is not good enough for God.

This is the real trouble. Every earthly trouble you have is there to remind you of this. And so faced with this trouble, we again have the same options. Will we run out to face the trouble and try to fix it ourselves? It's our natural reaction and inclination, but I can tell you already how that will end. You cannot please God through your own actions. You cannot make up for the crimes you've already committed. This is one challenge where the wall is inevitable. And so either you can try and delude yourself into thinking you're making progress when you're not, or you can jump right to the second option of anger or despair.

Or, you can let God lift you up. You see, the purpose of God showing us our sin, of teaching us that we are incapable of saving ourselves is not to make us feel bad. It's not to drive us to despair. It's to drive us to him. It does drive us to despair in ourselves, but that's good, because we *can't* save ourselves. We need to be beaten with this lesson over and over again; that I am no good on my own. We mustn't get *stuck* there though. We have another option besides ourselves, as unintuitive as it is. We must seek help from the very one coming to punish us for our crimes. Because there is help there. He wants to help. And everything that is broken or wrong in us, he will restore.

The hurts that we have, he takes into himself. The wrongs we have done he takes into himself. And the consequences and punishments of them all, he has already borne. At the death of Jesus, everything wrong with us went on him. Taken away as though they never existed in us, and covered on him as though he'd done them all. He was punished, he took the vengeance and the retribution, and it misses us entirely.

You see, all the things that are mentioned here in Isaiah, all these earthly troubles and more than we endure; blind, deaf, lame, mute and the struggles against the wilderness... these are all just the surface of our spiritual condition. You see, that's the point of the troubles. They are there to regularly beat back that instinct in us to think we can face every challenge we meet, that thinks we are smart enough and strong enough and wise enough. The troubles are there to crush our spirits so that we stop relying on ourselves, stop us from thinking we can save ourselves and instead turn us to the Lord first for deliverance in every situation.

Let the Lord take you out and look at the world and your life from his perspective. Look down then, do you see yourself there? A blind and helpless sheep struggling to find a safe way. You'll never make it on your own. So the Lord provides a path, he leads you to salvation. The only way you're going to make it on that path is if you watch that sheep constantly and put it back on the path when it starts to wander. The Lord does this for us through our troubles. Now, remember, the world and ourselves are horribly broken. We said it was surprising that there wasn't more trouble or chaos as a result. The reason for that is God prevents most of it. Our prayers of "deliver us from evil" do not go unheard. You've no idea the thousands of troubles God has kept from you. God constantly protects you on that path.

But sometimes we stubbornly wander from the path. We start to go back the way we came. We start to rely on ourselves a little too much again. God would rather just encourage us to return, he calls with his voice in the word, but that doesn't always work. We insist we can make it on our own. The only option left to the Lord is to prove to us that this is not the case. And so in love, to keep you safe, he chooses to allow some troubles through. He lets you get hurt physically, temporarily, to save you spiritually and eternally. It's not pleasant, but no one could argue that it's not worth it. Every trouble the Lord allows is a good thing sent from him out of love to keep you safe. Every ache, every pain, every heartbreak should cause us to turn to the Lord and humbly say, "Thank you Lord, for reminding me that I am not master of my domain. Thank you for reminding me that I am not in control of my fate. I am not as strong or capable as I think myself. Thank you, Lord, that you care enough to remind me how desperately I need you in every situation, no matter how often I wander."

Do not think this is somehow easy for the Lord to do to you. If you've ever had to discipline someone you care about, you know it's not easy. But because we want what is best for them in the end, out of love, we do it anyway. It would be easier on ourselves not to, but love compels us to. So it is with the Lord. We may wish he would provide us with easy and comfortable lives, but he loves us too much to do that. If he did, we would worship that ease, we would wander in our comfort and forget we need him. Instead, out of love, our Father allows exactly as much trouble as we need to keep us truly safe so that in the end all our troubles, spiritual and physical, can be healed perfectly in eternity.

Brothers and sisters remember why we have troubles. Remember what the Lord is using them for. When they come, let them remind you why you need God. Turn to him first in every difficulty for strength and support and he will provide it. Sometimes he will ask you to endure. Sometimes he will take it away. Many times he will use you to correct the trouble. But turn to him first. Remember that the trouble he allows is a loving blessing given by your Father who wants you saved. Smile upon your troubles instead of filling with anger or complaints. Let each one drive you to cling to him alone for help and strength in all things earthly and eternal. Thank the Lord that he loves you enough to bless you with trouble. Amen.