

Opening Illustration:

Three different types of difficulties – (1) difficulties you create [Elijah not having his bank card on him to pay for his hair cut]; (2) difficulties created by others [cruelty, injustice, unintentional accident or mistreatment, slander, harm]; (3) difficulties allowed by God [*technically both one and two fit into this category...* but I am referring to the experiences faced by people like the OT example of Job].

How do you respond when difficulties come your way? (Psalm 123)

- A Pattern Discovered
- The Difficulty Uncovered
- A Prayer Uttered

READ PSALM 123

I. **A pattern discovered** (Psalms of Ascent:120-134)¹

- A. Difficulty – a situation of difficulty
- B. Deliverance – focuses on God's power to keep
- C. Delight – the security in Zion and its God

Psalm 120-122 –

- 120 – Difficulty: alienation through destructive speech (2-3), isolation (5), talk of war (6)
- 121 – Deliverance from the Lord
- 122 – Security in Zion (1-3)

Psalm 123-125 –

- 123 – Difficulty: the ill and unjust treatment of people (contempt through scorn and pride) (3-4)
- 124 – Deliverance from the Lord
- 125 – Security in Zion (1)

Psalm 126-128 –

- 126 – Difficulty: longing for a restored fortune... weeping over current context (4-5)
- 127 – Deliverance from the Lord (unless the Lord builds the house...)
- 128 – Security in Zion (5)

¹ *Psalms by the Day: A New Devotional Translation* by Alec Motyer

Psalm 129-131 –

- 129 – Difficulty: affliction from youth (1-3)
- 130 – Deliverance from the Lord (1-2; 7-8)
- 131 – Security in Zion *and its God* (Yahweh) (2-3)

Psalm 132-134 – Arrival in the City

- The final triad of psalms of the Great Scent is unlike most of the preceding groups in that all three psalms are centered in Zion. There is no Zionward movement as in the first two triads, nor a ‘nearer my God to thee’ movement in the third and fourth. These are psalms of ‘home at last.’ There is, however, movement: from the establishment, the distinctive city (Psalm 132), to the heaven-blessed fellowship of the gathered family (133), to the ultimate reality of worshippers in Yahweh’s presence (134). – Motyer, 365

Illustration: God has a purpose in bringing us through difficult times and circumstance. He wants to conform us to the image of Jesus Christ.

Romans 5:1-4 Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we^[a] have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. ²Through him we have also obtained access by faith^[b] into this grace in which we stand, and we^[c] rejoice^[d] in hope of the glory of God. ³Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

James 1:2-4 ²Count it all joy, my brothers,^[a] when you meet trials of various kinds,³for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.⁴And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

The Life of David Brainerd:

<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/his-suffering-sparked-a-movement>

His life was short — 29 years, 5 months, and 19 days. And only eight of those years as a Christian. Only four as a missionary. And yet few lives have sent ripples so far and so wide as David Brainerd’s.

Why has his life made the impact that it has? Why did John Wesley say, “Let every preacher read carefully over the *Life of David Brainerd*”? Why did William Carey regard Jonathan Edwards’s *Life of David Brainerd* as precious and holy? Why did Henry Martyn (missionary to India and Persia) write, as a student in Cambridge in 1802, “I long to be like him!” (*Life of David Brainerd*, 4)?

Why has this life had such a remarkable influence? Or perhaps I should pose a more modest and manageable question: Why does it have such an impact on me? How has it helped me to press on in the ministry and to strive for holiness and divine power and fruitfulness in my life?

The answer is that Brainerd's life is a vivid, powerful testimony to the truth that God can and does use weak, sick, discouraged, beat-down, lonely, struggling saints who cry to him day and night to accomplish amazing things for his glory. There is great fruit in their afflictions. To illustrate this, we will look first at Brainerd's struggles, then at how he responded to them, and finally at how God used him with all his weaknesses.

Brainerd's Struggles

Three hundred years ago today, Brainerd was born on April 20, 1718, in Haddam, Connecticut, and was converted at age 21. **During his third year at Yale, where he was preparing for pastoral ministry, someone overheard the zealous Brainerd say that one of his tutors had “no more grace than a chair.”** The Great Awakening had already created tension between awakened students and the seemingly less spiritual faculty and staff, **so Brainerd, despite being at the top of his class, was summarily expelled.**

Though he tried again and again over the next several years to make things right, Yale never readmitted him. God had another plan for Brainerd. Instead of a quiet six years in the pastorate or lecture hall, followed by death and little historical impact for Christ's kingdom, God meant to drive him into the wilderness that he might suffer for his sake and have an incalculable influence on the history of missions.

A Broken Body

Brainerd struggled with almost constant sickness.

He had to drop out of college for some weeks because he had begun to cough up blood in 1740. In May 1744, he journaled, “Rode several hours in the rain through the howling wilderness, although I was so disordered in body that little or nothing but blood came from me” (*Life of David Brainerd*, 247). Now and again he would write something like, “In the afternoon my pain increased exceedingly; and was obliged to betake myself to bed. . . . Was sometimes almost bereaved of the exercise of my reason by the extremity of pain” (253).

In May of 1747, at Jonathan Edwards's house, the doctors told him that he had incurable consumption and did not have long to live (447). Edwards comments that in the week before Brainerd died, “He told me it was impossible for any to conceive of the distress he felt in his breast. He manifested much concern lest he should dishonor God by impatience under his extreme agony; which was such that he said the thought of enduring it one minute longer was almost insupportable.” The night before he died he said to those around him that “it was another thing to die than people imagined” (475–476).

A Despairing Mind

Brainerd struggled with recurring depression. He was tormented again and again with the most desperate discouragements. And the marvel is that he survived and kept going at all.

He often called his depression a kind of death. **There are at least 22 places in the diary where he longed for death as a freedom from his misery. For example, Sunday, February 3, 1745, he wrote, “My soul remembered ‘the wormwood and the gall’ (I might almost say hell) of Friday last; and I was greatly afraid I should be obliged again to drink of that**

‘cup of trembling,’ which was inconceivably more bitter than death, and made me long for the grave more, unspeakably more, than for hid treasures” (285).

Only in retrospect did he see himself as a “suitable object for the compassion of Jesus Christ.” But in the hours of darkness, he could sometimes feel no sense of hope or love or fear. This is the most fearful side of depression, since the natural restraints on suicide begin to vanish. But unlike William Cowper, Brainerd was spared the suicidal drive. His wishes for death were all restrained within the bounds of the biblical truth “the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away” (Job 1:21). He wishes for death many times, but only that God would take him (*Life of David Brainerd*, 172, 183, 187, 215, 249, for example).

It is simply amazing how often Brainerd pressed on with the practical necessities of his work in the face of these waves of discouragement. This has no doubt endeared him to many missionaries who know firsthand the kinds of pain he endured.

A Lonely Soul

He tells of having to endure the profane talk of two strangers one night in April of 1743 and says, “Oh, I longed that some dear Christian knew my distress!” (204). A month later he says, “Most of the talk I hear is either Highland Scotch or Indian. I have no fellow Christian to whom I might unbosom myself and lay open my spiritual sorrows, and with whom I might take sweet counsel in conversation about heavenly things, and join in social prayer” (207). This misery made him sometimes shrink back from going off on another venture. He wrote on Tuesday, May 8, 1744, “My heart sometimes was ready to sink with the thoughts of my work, and going alone in the wilderness, I knew not where” (248).

Brainerd was alone in his ministry to the end. During the last nineteen weeks of his life, Jerusha Edwards, Jonathan Edwards’s 17-year-old daughter, was his nurse, and many speculate that there was deep (even romantic) love between them. But in the wilderness and in the ministry, he was alone and could pour out his soul only to God. And God bore him and kept him going.

Brainerd’s Response

We could go on to describe Brainerd’s other struggles — his immense external hardships, his bleak outlook on nature, his trouble to love the Indians, his temptations to leave the field — but we turn now to how Brainerd responded to these struggles.

What we are struck with immediately is that he pressed on. One of the main reasons Brainerd’s life has such powerful effects on people is that, in spite of all his struggles, he never gave up his faith or his ministry. He was consumed with a passion to finish his race, and honor his Master, and spread the kingdom, and advance in personal holiness. It was this unswerving allegiance to the cause of Christ that makes the bleakness of his life glow with glory.

Among all the means that Brainerd used for pursuing greater and greater holiness and usefulness, prayer and fasting stand out above all. We read of him spending whole days in prayer. Wednesday, June 30, 1742: “Spent almost the whole day in prayer incessantly” (172). Sometimes he set aside as many as six periods in the day to pray: “Blessed be God, I had much freedom five or six times in the day, in prayer and praise, and felt a weighty concern upon my spirit for the salvation of those precious souls and the enlargement of the Redeemer’s kingdom among them” (280).

And along with prayer, Brainerd pursued holiness and usefulness with fasting. Again and again in his diary, he tells of days spent in fasting. One of the most remarkable, in view of how most of us celebrate our birthdays, is the fast on his 25th birthday:

Wednesday, April 20. Set apart this day for fasting and prayer, to bow my soul before God for the bestowment of divine grace; especially that all my spiritual afflictions and inward distresses might be sanctified to my soul. . . . My soul was pained to think of my barrenness and deadness; that I have lived so little to the glory of the eternal God. I spent the day in the woods alone, and there poured out my complaint to God. Oh, that God would enable me to live to his glory for the future! (205)

The Fruit of Brainerd's Affliction

As a result of the immense impact of Brainerd's devotion on his life, Jonathan Edwards wrote, in the next two years, *The Life of David Brainerd*, which has been reprinted more often than any of Edwards's other books. And through this *Life*, the impact of Brainerd on the church has been incalculable. Beyond all the famous missionaries who tell us that they have been sustained and inspired by Brainerd's *Life*, how many countless other unknown faithful servants must there be who have found from Brainerd's testimony the encouragement and strength to press on!

It is an inspiring thought that one small pebble dropped in the sea of history can produce waves of grace that break on distant shores hundreds of years later and thousands of miles away. Robert Glover ponders this thought with wonder when he writes,

It was Brainerd's holy life that influenced Henry Martyn to become a missionary and was a prime factor in William Carey's inspiration. Carey in turn moved Adoniram Judson. And so we trace the spiritual lineage from step to step — Hus, Wycliffe, Francke, Zinzendorf, the Wesleys and Whitefield, Brainerd, Edwards, Carey, Judson, and ever onward in the true apostolic succession of spiritual grace and power and world-wide ministry. (*The Progress of World-Wide Missions*, 56)

But the most lasting and significant effect of Brainerd's ministry is the same as the most lasting and significant effect of every pastor's ministry. There are a few Indians — perhaps several hundred — who, now and for eternity, owe their everlasting life to the direct love and ministry of David Brainerd.

Who can describe the value of one soul transferred from the kingdom of darkness, and from weeping and gnashing of teeth, to the kingdom of God's dear Son? If we live 29 years, or if we live 99 years, would not any hardships be worth the saving of one person from the eternal torments of hell for the everlasting enjoyment of the glory of God?

Onward and Upward

I thank God for the ministry of David Brainerd in my own life — the passion for prayer, the spiritual feast of fasting, the sweetness of the word of God, the unremitting perseverance through hardship, the relentless focus on the glory of God, the utter dependence on grace, the final resting in the righteousness of Christ, the pursuit of perishing sinners, the holiness while suffering, the fixing of the mind on what is eternal, and finishing well without cursing the disease that cut him down at age 29. With all his weaknesses and imbalances and sins, I love David Brainerd.

Oh, that God would grant us a persevering grace to spread a passion for his supremacy in all things, like Brainerd, for the joy of all peoples! Life is too precious to squander on trivial things. Grant us, Lord, the unswerving resolve to pray and live with David Brainerd's urgency: "Oh, that I might never loiter on my heavenly journey!" (186).

I. A pattern discovered. (*Psalms of Ascent*)

II. The difficulty uncovered. (3-4)

- A. Contempt (scorn, mockery, ridicule) from comfortable people who are threatened by your progress. (3b; Nehemiah 4:4)
- B. Contempt (scorn, mockery, ridicule) from complacent people who are threatened by your plans (4a; Nehemiah 2:19)

- c. Contempt (scorn, mockery, ridicule) from conceited people who are threatened by your principles. (4b; Psalm 119:51)

Illustration: Nehemiah rebuilding the walls in Jerusalem.

- I. **A pattern discovered.** (*Psalms of Ascent*)
- II. **The difficulty uncovered.** (3-4)

- III. **A prayer uttered.** (1-3)

Five young college students were spending a Sunday in London, so they went to hear the famed C.H. Spurgeon preach. While waiting for the doors to open, the students were greeted by a man who asked, "Gentlemen, let me show you around. Would you like to see the heating plant of this church?" They were not particularly interested, for it was a hot day in July. But they didn't want to offend the stranger, so they consented. The young men were taken down a stairway, a door was quietly opened, and their guide whispered, "This is our heating plant." Surprised, the students saw 700 people bowed in prayer, seeking a blessing on the service that was soon to begin in the auditorium above. Softly closing the door, the gentleman then introduced himself. It was none other than Charles Spurgeon.

Our Daily Bread, April 24.

I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom, and that of all about me seemed insufficient for the day.

A. Lincoln.

A. To God (1-3)

- **Submissive relationship** "O you enthroned in the heavens!" (1a)
- **Personal relationship** "to the LORD our God" (2c)
- **Covenantal relationship** "O LORD" (3)

B. For mercy (2b and 3a)

- **Mercy = (honnē) to be gracious, to show favor or compassion**
 - In dealing with the poor, needy, and orphans (Ps. 37:21, 26; 112:5)
 - By considering and sparing (Dt. 7:2; 28:50; Lam. 4:16)
 - In the bestowal of redemption from enemies, evils, and sins (Ps. 77:10; Ex. 33:19; Am. 5:15)

C. With desire (1-2)

- "my eyes..." (1),
 - "the eyes of servants" (2a),
 - "the eyes of a maidservant" (2b),
- "our eyes..." (2c)

D. With dependence (2)

- "the hand of their master..." (2a)
- "the hand of her mistress..." (2b)

- “till he have mercy upon us...” (2c) – implying the hand of God

Example of Jesus in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36-42; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:40-46)

Application:

- **What type of difficulty are you facing today?**
 - One you created
 - One created by others
 - One allowed by God (that doesn't easily fall under the above categories)
- **Are you taking your difficulty to God in prayer?**
 - In your personal life
 - In your community group
 - With your and friends
- **How do you need to grow in your relationship with God through this difficulty?**
 - Through Submission? (the one enthroned in heaven)
 - Through Surrender? (Time; Talents; Treasures)
 - Through Satisfaction? (Personal relationship with a promise keeping God)