

Being steadfast in your faith can be far more complicated than it seems on the surface. Challenges to faith come in all shapes and sizes. However we choose to overcome those challenges, sometimes we focus too much on just that our faith *is* being challenged and the suffering associated with that, but that is not where the importance lies.

One of my majors is in Philosophy, and one of the big topics that comes up across classes is the question of free will. If we have it, to what degree we have it, if it's even relevant that we have it, and what role God plays in those previous questions. It's remarkably complicated and there are lots of differing opinions. But I think when we talk about facing adversity and acting compassionately, the questions of our own free will and the free will of others are important in guiding us. But to get into the reflection of how these things are related, we start in the same place many of my children's talks start, *Star Wars*. In particular, *The Phantom Menace*, *The Clone Wars*, and *Rebels*, focusing on the characters of Maul and Obi-Wan Kenobi, who I will refer to just as Kenobi.

In 1999, the character Darth Maul was introduced in *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*. A striking and fearsome character, he defeats Qui-Gon Jinn in a duel before being sliced in half by Obi-Wan Kenobi and that is the end of him. Until 2011, when in the series *The Clone Wars* it was revealed that Maul is still alive, living in exile. But this Maul is very different to the warrior we previously knew. He has been driven mad by rage, muttering incomprehensibly with only a single coherent thought, his hatred for Kenobi.

Now how does this relate to the scripture? Well, 1st Peter 4 says, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed." The historical context for the

epistle of Peter is unclear. While Christians were definitely facing persecution at the time, who was persecuting them and how they were being persecuted is a matter for debate. But the message is a timeless one. Although we are suffering, it's to be expected, as suffering is nothing new. But take joy in the suffering, as it brings us closer to God. While that directive of accepting that suffering is nothing new and we ought to take joy in it is easy in theory, it's not so easy in practice. Suffering, frankly sucks. And it's okay to acknowledge that we don't like suffering. But we're not special because we suffer. Everybody suffers.

The philosopher Spinoza puts forward this connected idea of emotions and our ability to do things. He divides emotions into two categories: actions and passions. Actions are internal and just based on our character, like courage. Passions have external causes, like excitement or nervousness about an upcoming event. And how do these affect the way we do things? Well, we tend to do things in ways that are beneficial to us, or are at least not harmful. And when considering social interactions, Spinoza claims that what is considered beneficial or harmful to us can be determined by emotions. I'd make the claim that our response to suffering, both internally and externally, falls into the category of social interactions. But luckily, we are not alone in our suffering. God is around, and one of the "big ideas" of the Bible is that God is saying "lean on me." So when we are suffering, we must also acknowledge that God is with us while we are suffering, holding us up while we stumble along. If we ignore God's presence during the tough times we all encounter, we risk ending up even more miserable, focused solely on those things that are going to lead to us spiralling into fear, anger, and suffering. And thinking back to Spinoza, by dwelling in these very negative emotions, there is an effect on our capability to act the way God calls us to. That stewing in negative feelings is what happens to Maul, and following the Sith doctrine, he falls into the belief that there is nothing *but* suffering. We are

fortunate enough to know that that is not true, although we are not always good at recognizing that in a given moment. And when we forget, that suffering leads to passions, and we shouldn't let those passions override our actions. It is important to reorient ourselves to God. And this is what Peter is getting at in his epistle. Yes, Christians are suffering, but we are fortunate to have God helping to guide us along. And with God as our guide through the fiery ordeal, we do not have to do things from our passions but can instead do so through our passions.

Skipping along in the story of Maul, his mind is restored and he reintroduces himself to the galaxy, causing chaos in an effort to face Kenobi again. After multiple confrontations, some going in Maul's favor, some in Kenobi's, another person from Kenobi's past crosses paths with Maul. A love interest of Kenobi, Dutchess Satine of the planet Mandalore, whom Kenobi told, "Had you said the word, I would have left the Jedi Order for you." In a grand bid to draw in Kenobi, Maul usurps the government of Mandalore and Satine. Kenobi comes to save his love, only to watch Maul kill her in front of him.

Now Maul fundamentally does not understand, and may even be jealous of Kenobi. Like Kenobi, his life has been consumed by tragedy and misfortune. But Kenobi rejects that his lot in life is somehow special because of that, while Maul believes that he is somewhat unique in his experiences. To Maul, Kenobi's choices don't make sense. The dark path is easy, and after so much tragedy, Kenobi ought to be fully justified in turning his back on the Jedi Order. But Kenobi holds fast, dedicated to what he believes in. What Kenobi believes in is generally the Jedi Code, although he is sometimes creative in his interpretations of it. We as Christians are called to be like Kenobi, although we are to believe in the teachings of Jesus, yet too often we fall into the trap of being like Maul, consumed by our passions. Although suffering happens, we are not meant to make an idol of our suffering. The fact that we suffer does not make us special. Pain

and suffering happens to everyone. What makes us special is our choice to lift each other up and work together through our suffering. The hymn doesn't go, "They'll know we are Christians by our suffering," it goes "They'll know we are Christians by our **love**."

Skipping along in the story of Maul yet again, we find him again in *Rebels*, where he is in exile yet again, obsessing over Kenobi. After some confrontations with the *Rebels* protagonists, Maul eventually finds where Kenobi is hiding, through some force-magic. And finally, in 2017, we have the last confrontation between Kenobi and Maul, back where it all started on Tatooine. Maul questions him, asking why one of the greatest warriors in the galaxy is hiding on a backwater planet, in the desert, eventually determining that he was not there truly in hiding, but guarding something. We of course know that he is watching over the hero of *Star Wars*, Luke Skywalker. Worried Maul may find this out, Kenobi prepares to stop him. At which point a duel is inevitable and they both draw their lightsabers.

And now we see how remarkable Kenobi truly is. He begins in the pose of General Kenobi, blade overhead and pointing at the Maul in challenge. This is his position as a warrior, and a powerful one at that. But he realises that he is no longer that man anymore. He is Old Ben Kenobi, and repositions himself, lightsaber in front of him. This is the position of a calm and humble protector. But then, quite curiously, he changes positions again. He pulls his lightsaber close to his chest on his right side; the pose of the padawan of Qui-Gon Jinn, like he was all those years ago, and this pose is the one that Maul is consumed in anguish by, the bright pupil whose creativity is key to his survival.

This is where the metaphor starts to fall short. Kenobi can really only exemplify a few simple traits at any one point. So we turn back to the scripture for support. Psalm 68 describes some major and contrasting traits of God. God is both someone that causes adversaries to flee

before him and vanish, and also the father of orphans and champion of widows. And throughout the psalm this dichotomy of traits is expounded upon in a way that a causal readthrough would frame as a source of conflict. However, this continuous repetition and emphasis on opposites is key to the message of this psalm and many others like it.

The way Hebrew poetry like the psalms works is by an emphasis on repetition of concepts and comparisons between concepts. It is then somewhat up to the reader to interpret which side of the comparison is the one that is emphasized. Psalm 68 in particular employs comparisons like, “Father of orphans, champion of widows, is God in his holy house. God makes homes for the homeless, leads prisoners to freedom, but leaves rebels to rot in hell.” as well as repetitions that build off of previous statements, like the opening “Up with God! Down with his enemies! Adversaries, run for the hills!” being reiterated upon later on with, “The Lord gave the word; thousands called out the good news: ‘Kings of the armies are on the run, on the run!’” This psalm can easily be interpreted with a focus on praising how mighty and fearsome the Lord is, or as praising how kind and loving the Lord is, but I really think it should be interpreted as focusing on a God who is a righteous protector, both mighty and loving. My interpretation heavily focuses on the particular name of God utilized in the psalm, from the lines, “On that day that Shaddai scattered the kings, snow fell on Black Mountain.” There are many names for God, which all have particular uses and meanings, and the one used here, “Shaddai”, has somewhat of a contested meaning aside from directly translating to “Almighty.” Consistent among multiple interpretations though is that it represents a nurturing and caring aspect of God. And that seems to be a very consistent theme in the psalm, where after each glorification of a powerful God, it returns and contrasts that with the compassionate and loving God. Now I don’t think that this psalm is in any way diminishing the idea of a mighty warrior God, nor is it putting a loving and

nurturing God on a pedestal. I think what this psalm is really trying to emphasize is that instead of being distinct aspects of God, they're really two sides of the same coin.

And so at the end of this story of Maul and Kenobi, we see a really good example of how this duality exists. Back on Tatooine, we see that Maul does not see the Kenobi in front of him. He still sees the Kenobi of the past, the one that defeated him on Naboo. And Maul strikes at him the same way he struck at Qui-Gon, obviously expecting the same result. But instead, Kenobi blocks and parries every movement, before delivering a fatal strike. And as Kenobi holds him in his arms as he dies, he finally understands that this is not some random guard post. This is the most important guard post in the galaxy, guarding a young Luke Skywalker. What is protected is the hope that the galaxy will be saved. And Maul's final words are not those of rage, but of hope, as he realizes what Kenobi is guarding. He says, "He will ... avenge us."

And now we're really getting to the crux of what I'm trying to say regarding that we're not special. Everyone suffers, from the most evil to the most righteous of us. We are not special because of that suffering. However we are exceptional because of how we choose to behave in the face of that suffering, guided by actions and not passions. Kenobi is one of the greatest warriors of his time in the *Star Wars* universe, but he is constantly tortured by the character of Maul taking away from him things that he cares deeply about. But in the end, Kenobi doesn't hold that against him as he compassionately holds Maul in his last moments. Going back to the writings of Spinoza, Kenobi is in a very complicated position. Kenobi is finally free of Maul, and has the chance to just walk away from him, but he voluntarily chooses to stay with him in his last moments. And although Kenobi certainly has the emotions to justify that he doesn't need to be compassionate, he embraces the emotions that allow him to be the caring person that Maul never got in his life. And while not perhaps to the same extreme of this duel, we are called to act

similarly. Suffering is inevitable, but while we may have experienced a higher level of suffering ourselves, that doesn't preclude us from helping lessen the suffering of others. As Christians we must stand firmly in our faith, defending against attempts to shake us, but we must also be compassionate when someone is hurting, whether they be a friend or an enemy. It is God's gift that we have the free will to do things however we want, but it is our responsibility to voluntarily demonstrate God's love. And that fundamentally boils down to the way we feel internally. We must embody our compassion in our emotions, or we will never truly effectively exercise our compassion in how we behave.