

## *The Value of Suffering*

*Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy. If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified. ~ 1 Peter 4:12-14*

The topic of this article is intimidating for me personally. What would I, or, for that matter, nearly anyone else who lives in the US, know about suffering and persecution for the name of Christ? Anyone who reads *The Voice of the Martyrs* magazine knows that we experience nothing comparable to the persecuted saints in other places.

Of course, that's not the only kind of suffering the Scriptures address. There is suffering due to physical afflictions, infirmities, suffering in doing good, suffering as a consequence of one's own sin, suffering according to the will of God, sufferings of trials, satanic afflictions, collective suffering in fellowship with other believers, etc.

I had a bout with a physical affliction not too long ago, yet I wouldn't compare my suffering to what many I know are going through nor to the suffering of those who write to TBC for prayer concerning their own physical ailments. The reason I believe the Lord put it on my heart to write this article has little to do with my own situation or anyone else's. I'm concerned about the prevailing attitude in American Christendom germane to suffering, which is, "Avoid it at all costs!"

Although part of me wants to add an "amen" to such thinking, I know that it doesn't reflect what the Bible teaches. In fact, such erroneous thinking will have disastrous effects. It is an insidious leaven that will distort one's relationship with the Lord and will ultimately affect one's walk. Moreover, a wrong view of suffering will greatly hinder a believer's true understanding of God and the truth of His Word.

Suffering is a consequence of sin. It did not exist before sin entered the heart of mankind. *Genesis chapter 1* indicates that God's creation prior to the disobedience of Adam and Eve was "very good," that is, perfect in every way. Sin changed all of that for all creation. Suffering followed the inescapable and deadly virus of sin. Even so, God, in His foreknowledge of what man would do and what the consequences would be, provided the solution for the sins of mankind through Christ's sacrificial death and resurrection. Divine justice was perfectly satisfied through our Savior's full payment for our sins. Nevertheless, temporal suffering remains. Why?

The redemption provided by Jesus Christ, although complete, is still a choice for sinners to reject or to receive by faith. Christ's gift of salvation will be available for humanity until the last willing soul repents and believes. Until then, the choice to sin and its consequence of suffering will remain a temporal fact of life.

Although the world can point to some successes in minimizing suffering, its most noble and far-reaching attempts do little to either confine the amount or to cover the extent of it. The all-pervasive

pseudoscience of psychotherapy, for example, is a multi-billion-dollar industry tilting at the windmill of alleviating mental suffering. To end all suffering is clearly beyond the capacity of humanity, yet the presumptuous efforts continue.

That's the secular world's attitude, but what about the thinking among the religious? Buddhists believe that desire is the cause of all suffering and therefore teaches that ceasing to desire solves the problem. Hindus hope for the elimination of suffering through a process of reincarnations. They believe that each improved go-round will supposedly lessen and eventually end all suffering. That's what yoga is all about.

What is the view among Christians? Most reflect the world's thinking and actions, to some degree, rather than what the Bible teaches. This has led to serious doctrinal errors among many who claim to be biblical Christians. Perhaps the most widespread promotion of this is in the "healing and prosperity" movement that commands a large part of so-called Christian television (*see The Seduction of Christianity, resource pages*). Followers of this movement promote the false idea that suffering was done away with at the Cross. Therefore, this teaching claims, issues that produce suffering are caused by a lack of faith on the part of the sufferer. As error begets error, the proponents of "healing and prosperity" distort biblical faith into a method that can be used to ward off illness and bring about riches.

The whole process works its way into a form of religious and mind science, thereby turning God into an entity or force that works through spiritual laws, especially by faith, which Christians and even pagans can apply. This has led to the doctrine that one's belief is the determiner of one's condition: thinking that you have an illness is "negative" thinking, which causes the illness. Positive thinking, on the other hand, brings about good health and prosperity. Mankind, in this system, becomes the arbiter of his condition by his thoughts (*see The Secret Seduction, resource pages*). We're told that this is the way God works and that we, too, can do the same as "gods under God." In addition to being completely blasphemous and a deadly form of occultism that deters people from seeking medical help, the healing and prosperity movement spawns ultimate rebellion in the name of God.

Suffering is a condition of life to which we are all subjected. How we understand it is crucial to how we deal with it. In suffering, and in much else included in the Word of God, we need to look to the Lord for understanding: "*Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding*" (*Proverbs 4:7*). Let's begin our "getting" with what is obvious in Scripture.

God hasn't completely eliminated suffering from anyone's life. Jesus, who is both God and the perfect, sinless Man, nevertheless suffered as a man on this earth. All the patriarchs suffered; Job suffered; all the apostles suffered; Mary, the virgin mother of Jesus, suffered; the disciples suffered, and Paul gives us some fear-provoking details of what he himself suffered. We understand the origin of suffering and the fact of suffering--but why would God allow it in the lives of those who love Him? Knowing what the Scriptures teach about the character of God, we can conclude that if there were no value in allowing humanity (and especially those who love Him) to suffer, God would not allow it.

Scripture, however, sets the conditions and the time frame. Suffering is temporal for all and eternal for some. For believers, it will cease at eternity's door (*Revelation 21:4*); for those who reject God's salvation through Jesus Christ, suffering will be everlasting (*2 Thessalonians 1:8-9*). What then of the

suffering today of both the lost and those who love the Lord?

For those who have not yet turned to the Lord for His salvation, their condition of suffering often creates compelling opportunities for them to cry out to God for His help. To those who do so in truth, He shows His mercy for their temporal plight and provides grace for their new life in Christ and their eternal destiny (*Acts 2:21*). But what of the temporal suffering of those who have been born of the Spirit and have received the gift of eternal life? What possible value could there be in their suffering? To borrow part of a verse from the Apostle Paul, "*Much in every way!*" The problem is, however, that other than in general, the details of God's specific purposes for the suffering of a believer, with few exceptions, are beyond our ability to discern. The general purposes, however, abound throughout the pages of Scripture.

God's purpose for allowing suffering in Job's life is made clear to us and to him. A closer relationship with the Lord is the outcome:

*"I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5-6).*

He discovered during his affliction - during his intense preoccupation with himself - that his personal knowledge of God was greatly constricted by his self-life. Although God restored to Job far more than Satan destroyed in his life, Job's material gain could not be compared to the temporal and eternal gain and value of his more intimate relationship with the Lord. Job's suffering experience speaks to us about our own God-restricting preoccupation with self.

The epistle to the Hebrews was written primarily to Jewish Christians who were being persecuted by their legalistic kinsmen, and many were consequently pressured into slipping away from living out what they had been taught in the faith (*Hebrews 2:1*). Yet those sufferers were exhorted to steadfastness by the example of earlier saints who suffered even more:

*"Women received their dead raised to life again: and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection: And others had trials of cruel mockings and scourgings...bonds and imprisonment: They were stoned...sawn asunder...tempted...slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins...destitute, afflicted, tormented; (Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts...in mountains...in dens and caves of the earth. And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise" (Hebrews 11:35-39).*

What value can we find in what these saints who are included in the "Hall of Faith" suffered? On a personal basis, we can only guess, although it's a given that the Holy Spirit used their testimony to greatly encourage the recipients of the letter to the Hebrews, and to us as well.

Just so there is no confusion, a couple of qualifications are necessary here. The saints referred to in Hebrews are simply those true believers of old, just as everyone today who has been saved by faith alone in the finished work of Christ our Savior is a saint. That's a biblical saint. In my youth as a Roman Catholic, I collected devotional cards of canonized "saints." It was commonly taught that those "saints" who suffered the most were the most saintly. Many of them contributed to their own

suffering by purposefully inflicting pain on themselves. Why? The Catholic Church teaches that it is through personal suffering, either on earth or in Purgatory (where supposedly sins need to be completely purged before anyone can enter Heaven) that sins are expiated. All of this is a rejection of the gospel and a perversion of biblical suffering.

The Apostle Paul's incredibly productive and exemplary life features a litany of suffering that has been referred to as the "perils of Paul." Just listing them all would fill up the rest of this article; even so, here are a few examples:

Paul was whipped, beaten, imprisoned, stoned, shipwrecked, adrift at sea, dangers in journeys, weariness, painfulness, sleeplessness, often in hunger, thirst, in cold and nakedness (2 *Corinthians* 11:22-27). He went through mental anguish and physical afflictions yet he could declare in absolute truth: *"I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake"* (2 *Corinthians* 12:10). How could that be? He tells us: *"Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me"* (2 *Corinthians* 12:9).

If Paul's attitude seems strange or foreign to us, it could be because, although we may know Jesus personally, we don't know Him well enough to have experienced the depths of His power in our lives. It may also be that we don't understand how much Paul wanted everything in his (and our!) brief temporal life to contribute to his life in Christ, at present, surely - and for eternity, especially. That rings out in his words: *"That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death"* (*Philippians* 3:10). His heart in this and his eternal perspective are also reflected when he exulted, *"For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain"* (*Philippians* 1:21). *"Whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's"* (*Romans* 14:8). This reveals a profound love for Jesus that is missing in many of our lives. Paul's great desire was for all believers to follow him in the intimate love and personal identification he had experienced with Jesus. Paul was looking forward to far greater experiences throughout eternity!

When Paul wrote regarding his ministry to the Colossians of his rejoicing *"in my sufferings for you"* and admonished them to *"fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church"* (*Colossians* 1:24), he certainly wasn't saying (contrary to what I was taught as a Catholic) that Christ's payment for our sins was insufficient in any way. Nor that he could expiate the sins of the Colossians by suffering for them (another false Catholic teaching). The *"afflictions of Christ"* remain only in the sense that believers in Him, His body, will experience trials, persecutions, and tribulations (2 *Timothy* 3:12). Paul, the other apostles, and Christ's disciples down through history have all *"fill[ed] up"* sufferings by ministering to one another and as a consequence of their preaching and living out the gospel.

How could Paul *"rejoice"* in his sufferings for fellow believers? Some of the reasons are found in the *first chapter of 2 Corinthians*. He and they would be ministered to by the *"Father of mercies and the God of all comfort."* *His comfort from the Lord in his tribulation would enable him to comfort others in their suffering: "For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ. And whether we be afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation [i.e., strengthening them through their trials]...or whether we be comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation"* (vv. 5-6).

For the believer in Jesus, every trial of suffering is an opportunity to grow in the faith, to grow in our relationship with the Lord, and to see Him work in our lives in a uniquely personal way that demonstrates His compassion, His comfort, His tender mercies, His loving kindnesses, His grace, and His endless love. Only God knows what each of us needs to experience and learn in order to be *"conformed to the image of his Son"* (2 Corinthians 1:4-5; Romans 8:29).

Whether we or those the Lord has put on our hearts are suffering, let Paul's unceasing intercession for the Colossians be our prayer for ourselves and for our loved ones.

*"For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness" (Colossians 1:9-11).*

Note that it concludes with *"longsuffering with joyfulness."* No trial of suffering can rob us of our joy in Christ as we are strengthened by Him. *TBC*

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