

THE BLESSINGS OF SUFFERING

By

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Suffering is a reality that we wish never existed. We flee from its sight, are repulsed by its touch and sickened with its embrace. Seemingly out of nowhere it assaults us as a venomous snake attempting to fill our hearts and minds with its deadly poison. It wraps itself around us, trying to squeeze the life out of us. We want to be free from its clutches, free from its influence, free from its pain. But we can't, for it is a part of us, a byproduct of what we are and an integral part of our fallen world. We are both its creator and its victim.

Suffering exposes our true character—what we are on the inside. Either it reveals the beauty of a Christlike character or brings to light the ugliness of our sinful nature. Suffering can bring out of us those wicked attitudes and actions that we thought were long dead or reveal dimensions of our character we never knew existed. Even Saint Paul cried out, “O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” (Rom 7:24).

Fortunately, in the midst of our pain there is purpose. Divine purpose! The Lord uses suffering to conform us into the “image of His Son” (Rom. 8:29). The Great Physician will skillfully use His scalpel to cut out of us the evil that is so interwoven into our nature. But we must yield to His handiwork and surrender to His will or we will suffer under the ravages of our unconquered characters.

Suffering is no respecter of persons. It crosses all economic, religious and racial lines. We live in an unsafe world and suffering brings this truth home. Pride and self-will are attacked by the mighty blows that suffering inflicts. If we are wise, we will learn from our pain. If we are foolish, we will rebel against the good that suffering can afford.

Unfortunately, most western Christians approach the subject of suffering from a secular worldview. When we make happiness and prosperity the prize of our existence then suffering is only a cruel obstacle. We desperately need to have a biblical worldview that compels us to live surrendered lives to Christ. Then we will find the blessings that come out of suffering. As we journey through life's valleys we can find profound comfort knowing that Jesus can turn our mourning into dancing (Ps. 30:11-12; KJV).

Listed below are just a few of the blessings that come out of suffering.

SALVATION

Most people come to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ through suffering. When life is going well we ignore our spiritually bankrupt condition. Only when the raw truth of our sin pierces our hard hearts will we will receive God's gift of repentance. It usually takes a strong dose of pain and suffering to bring us to our knees. We must be convinced that we need saving before we will seek the Savior.

The Lord also uses suffering as a tool to drive His wayward children home. This is a great kindness. To forsake our "first love" means we have played the spiritual whore (Rev. 2:4). The moment we cease to passionately seek after the Lord we start loving gods of our own making. Then the Spirit begins to convict us through the Word. If we refuse to listen to the Lord's sweet call then He will amplify the voices of the Word and Spirit with suffering. The prodigal son would have never returned home to his father had he not severely suffered over his backsliding.

DRAWING CLOSER TO JESUS

The greatest way in which our characters are transformed is by sitting at Jesus' feet, nurturing a passion to be with Him and to be like Him. But before we will fully surrender to Jesus we must come to see our desperate neediness. At times this can be a painful process as L. E. Maxwell points out:

You must learn by kindness or by terror. God's sword of providence may be laid successively to every tie that binds you to self and sin. Wealth, and health, and friends, may fall before that sword. The inward fabric of your life will go to pieces. Your joy will depart. Smitten within and without, burned and peeled and blasted, you may finally, amidst the dreadful baptism, be driven from the sinful inconsistency of living for yourself. You may at length be disposed to yield self over to the victory and undoing of Calvary.

In this divine work of delivering us from our natural propensity to rebellion and self-absorption we find the infinite blessing of Christ and His nearness.

Hearts filled with love for God will discover that suffering only presses them deeper into His love. Hudson Taylor, founder of the China Inland Mission, learned this truth. As the Mission grew so did the trials. Eventually Mr. Taylor had to trust the Lord for the financial needs of almost a thousand missionaries. He wrote to a friend, "My path is far from easy. . . It is well, that it should be so. Difficulties afford a platform upon which He can show Himself. Without them we could never know how tender, faithful and almighty our God is."

Mr. Taylor turned his trials into blessings by seeking hard after the Savior. It was the matchless love of Christ that captured his heart. The struggles of life should press us deeper into His presence, never away from Him. When we wholeheartedly seek our Precious Savior we will surely find Him though hardships and sufferings abound or the devil and the world do their worst.

Paul had a burning passion to “know Christ” (Phil. 3:10). His desire was not obscured with worthless fantasies about financial prosperity or vain illusions about fleeting happiness. He knew all too well that to intimately know Jesus meant to fellowship with Him in His sufferings. Too many Christians today know Christ only superficially because they do not want to pay the price to build a deep relationship with the Lord. But there is a type of suffering associated with knowing Christ in a deep manner. David Brainerd called it a “pleasing pain that makes my soul press after God.”

BUILDING CHRIST’S CHURCH

Jesus loves His church! He “gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own” (Titus 2:14). All true Christians are called be co-laborers with Christ in building and nurturing His kingdom. We are not called to criticize it or tear it down, but to build it. Paul labored with all that was in him to build Christ’s church. This same call and responsibility rests upon our shoulders today.

It’s costly to build Christ’s kingdom in a hostile world. If we are not willing to suffer then our Lord’s church will not be built. The truth lies naked before our eyes—we are failing our Lord; His church is shrinking in America because we are unwilling to suffer in order to build it. Scores of self-proclaimed Christians have a hard time attending church once a week, much less giving their lives to build Christ’s kingdom. Their self-absorbed lifestyles are contrary to what it means to be a biblical Christian.

The Lord warned Israel through Haggai saying, “Give careful thought to your ways” (Hag. 1:7). Why did the rebuke come? Because the people were building their own houses while God’s “house remains a ruin” (Hag. 1:4). Are we any different today? Was not the prophet also speaking directly to the church of the 21st century? But are we listening?

The Lord is speaking the same rebuke to us, ““You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?” declares the LORD Almighty. ‘Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house’” (Hag. 1:9). Like Israel, we have become a self-absorbed people thinking that happiness comes through the pursuit of our own desires. We have failed to recognize the privilege of suffering to build the kingdom of God—I will even go further—of laying down our lives for the Savior.

REACHING THE LOST

Another reason we are called to suffer with Jesus is to perpetuate His mission to rescue the perishing (Pr. 24:11-12; Lk. 19:10). The early church was a wonderful example of the value suffering plays in reaching non-believers. “Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits, and all of them were healed” (Acts 5:16). After the entire crowd was healed the high priests and all their associates were filled with jealousy. They arrested the apostles and threw them in jail.

That night the Lord sent an angel to open the prison doors so they could continue ministering (Acts 5:19). At daybreak they preached in the temple courts. The religious leaders were astonished when someone said, “Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people” (Acts 5:25). Notice that when they got out of jail they did not cower in a corner or start complaining over their suffering.

Whether we are thrown into jail, beaten with rods or rejected by family and friends, it is costly to be a witness for Jesus. The suffering we experience may be great or minuscule, but it will always be worth it when seen in light of Calvary. The sacrifice of our money, possessions, time and the pursuit of pleasure is a small price to pay to win the unsaved to Christ. Let us not stand before the Lord filled with worthless excuses of why we did not spend our lives in rescuing a perishing world. At the judgment seat of Christ our excuses will be seen as nothing other than cowardice, pride and self-absorption.

HOLINESS

Suffering is one of the tools Jesus uses to mold our character to be like His own. This is why Paul included suffering into his discourse on the maturing process of every believer. He told us to “rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Rom. 5:3-4). For suffering to help mold our character for good we must learn how to live a surrendered life to Christ.

Our attempts at avoiding suffering may actually cause us to fight against the only One who can genuinely help us in our time of need. Victory is available through God’s grace when we submit to His will, face our trials head on and then crucify everything in our lives that is contrary to Christ. Instead of whining and complaining when we suffer we ought to be asking the Lord to use these trials to make us more like Him.

When we suffer it’s extremely important to keep our eyes on Jesus, and not upon ourselves, or we will feed our natural inclination towards self-absorption. We need to have a right understanding of eternity so our hope will not rest in those things that “moth and rust

destroy” (Mt. 6:19). This thought moved Paul to state, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18).

Remember, “God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows” (Gal. 6:7). If we live selfish lives then we will reap the consequences of our wickedness both in this life and in the one to come. However, when we suffer for Jesus we will also reap what we sow. Our Wonderful Savior will never abandon His own. He will walk with us through our suffering and wait at death’s door to take us home. Jesus is not slow to reward those who love Him supremely. He will be our “exceeding great reward” (Gen. 15:1, KJV).

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