

ON SUFFERING

BY

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Suffering is a universal problem. From the modern hospital bed in Rochester to the littered streets of Calcutta, there is physical pain, mental anguish and the lonely helplessness of dying.

Much is being said and written about poverty, human suffering and the misfortune of the masses, as if the sheer force of statistics made the individual suffering less or more. But little consideration is given to the personal problems of meeting suffering and death. With more publicity on poverty, sickness, mental illness and medical care, there is less understanding about personal suffering. While the experts worry over suffering society, personal suffering is not supposed to exist.

Heralds of the Great Society have narcotized the people: there is to be no more ignorance, poverty, disappointments, infidelity, defeat nor despair. In our society everyone, if he is "normal," is healthy, wealthy, financially secure from the cradle to the grave and supplied with plenty of recreation and entertainment. Nevertheless, he is going to suffer. But when suffering strikes, it comes as a great shock to persons totally unprepared.

Many writers, whose understanding of the book market is developed far beyond their understanding of THE BOOK, tell us that the Christian life should be one free of burdens. They "use" Christian concepts for success in the market place and insist that if we have "faith," God will make us rich, cure all our physical ailments and get us elected as the most outstanding person of the year by the Chamber of Commerce.

Then the Christian asks, "But, why must there be so much suffering? Why does God allow me to suffer?"

If they had done their home work, they would have read that suffering is a part of God's program. Jesus said, "The Son of man must suffer many things ... If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:22-23). So at the very beginning of the Christian journey, there is the introduction of the cross and suffering. How could anyone think that he could be a true Christian and escape suffering?

Since Adam's rebellion, there have been evil people in the world. Life must be lived out in the midst of good and evil, and though we choose the good, there still remains the pressure and opposition of the evil. "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated me before it hated you" (John 15:18).

A Sunday school teacher said the youth asked the question, "Why does God allow sin in the world?" The answer is that as long as God allows people in the world, He must allow

sin! Man is created with such freedom of mind to choose good or evil, and as long as he is alienated from God he continues to choose evil. Only by stamping out man could God stamp out sin. Of course God will do just that very thing one of these days, by destroying the entire world, sinners included. But he is “long-suffering, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). He continues to allow all kinds of men to live so that all may have opportunity to choose His way. As long as the world stands there will be good and evil, and therefore suffering. The solution will come when God rescues all believers (who have turned their hearts and minds to the Creator, through Christ) from the world, and then destroys it. In the new heavens and earth, there will be only righteousness, for there will be only righteous people there (2 Peter 3:13).

Still we ask, “But why does God allow THIS suffering?” In the prime of life, one is cut down in the agony of disease. The one that is striving to make a Christian home is stunned by the wife or husband who opposes the life of faith. After gearing one’s life to suburban living, with all the luxuries a comfortable salary can afford, one finds he is out of a job and the financial pressure becomes unbearable.

So suffering inevitably comes even to those of faith. We might say that it come especially to those of faith, for these are the ones who can profit by it. To understand suffering, we first must understand the purpose of God. “And we know that to them that love God all things work together for good, even to them that are called according to His purpose” (Roman 8:28). ALL THINGS! Even suffering? Yes, especially suffering.

Did not the suffering of Christ work out for the good of God s purpose, that He might redeem sinners from death by the sinless One dying in the sinner’s place? Did not the suffering of Stephen work for good for all Christians who are challenged by his example? Who can know the influence Stephen’s martyrdom had on Paul, who held the coats that day for the Jews who committed the murder? And, while the suffering ended Stephen’s life, it did not thwart God’s purpose for him, for God can raise him up at the last day and grant him immortality. This, after all, is the ultimate purpose.

And what of the suffering of Peter and John? Did it thwart the purpose of God for them? Not at all. It developed their patience and compassion, so that they could withstand the pressures of the day and hold fast to the truth of God, leaving the marvelous records for millions to read and know His purpose. There is a witness for God that only the dark shadows can bring out. The fact of God’s sustaining spirit can only be proven in the crucible of suffering. The reality of our belief in God’s ultimate purpose to rescue us from this present world and give us immortality in a new creation is best demonstrated in the pressure and suffering we endure. Hence the Hebrew Christians could take joyfully the spoiling of their goods, knowing that for themselves they had a better and more enduring possession (Hebrews 10:34).

The purpose of God is expressly stated: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Genesis 1:26). All things can and do work toward this purpose, FOR THOSE WHO LOVE GOD. Is your suffering physical? Paul suffered physically, “longing to be clothed upon with (the) habitation which is from heaven.,, (II Cor. 5:2) such suffering in

the flesh teaches us the necessity and the glory of the immortality to be granted at Christ's coming, when all believers will be changed from the perishable body to the body that is powerful, glorious and imperishable. Such physical suffering causes the witness of the sufferer to stand out all the stronger. It was when seen in the midst of the fiery furnace that the three Hebrews in Babylon called attention to the power of God. From the cross we look excitedly to the resurrection.

Is your suffering caused by financial pressure? It is God's purpose to have us trust Him totally, not for material benefits, but in spite of their absence. It was after Job lost all that he possessed that he exclaimed, "To God would I commit my cause" (Job 5:8). It is only when deprived of material things that many people can cease to depend upon them. To be diminished in goods, does not mean we are diminished in God's eyes. Remember the goal: to be conformed to the image of God. This does not require luxurious furnishings, and all the modern gadgets money buys. Moreover, the witness to the world is more convincing from the lips of those who obviously do not serve God for the sake of temporal gain.

Is your suffering at the hands of others? We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, against rulers of this world (Ephesians 6:12). The prince of evil, with all his demonic forces, is abroad to defeat the purposes of God. Jesus said, "In the world you have tribulation." We know that "the whole world lies in the evil one" (1 John 5:19). It is natural that the purpose of God should be opposed by God's enemies, and we who are aligned with His purpose will receive the enemies blows. But it is just such conflict that forms the background for our witness and which builds us up for the battle. Adversity puts muscle in our faith and our message. "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial among you, which cometh upon you to PROVE YOU, as though a strange thing happened unto you: but insomuch as you are partakers of Christ's suffering, REJOICE; that at the revelation of His glory also you may rejoice with exceeding joy" (1 Peter 4:12).

Suffering does not always turn its victim to God, but if the victim is one who loves God, it will. Suffering burns out the ambition to gain this world, so that we might gain the new one. Suffering demonstrates the evil of sin and Satan, and sets us toward the goal of godliness. Suffering lays a steady hand upon our fickleness, to force us into a steadfast purpose. And when we have passed through the fire of suffering, we do not curse the flame, but rather bless God for the affliction which opened our eyes to His blazing Glory.

To understand suffering, we must know the purpose of God, and must choose His purpose for our own. We have to be pilgrims in this world, knowing that "the world passes away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abides for ever" (1 John 2:17).

Toward the end of the age, anti-Christian forces are to become more militant, seeking to destroy all that is Christian. This is already in effect, causing intense suffering to faithful Christians over all the world. But it also means that the time of fulfillment of all we hope for is close at hand. "But when these things begin to come to pass, look up, and lift up

your heads; because your redemption draws nigh” (Luke 21:28). To be marked for opposition from God’s enemies means also that we are marked for His fellowship in the new creation.

“In the world you have tribulation, but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.”

Just for Youth

“The Bible has the secret of a good and happy life for you. The church, its leaders, teachers and minister, as well as your own Christian parents are most concerned for your happiness, and that you have a wholesome and worthwhile life ...”

“Don’t ever get the idea that your parents, the church, the preacher and the Bible are trying to take all the fun out of life. Instead they are trying to help you to avoid the sad, heart-breaking experiences of sin. Always remember that God made us, and that He knows exactly what is the best for us. There is no reason that you have to learn from experience that sin, immorality and a life of wickedness do not bring satisfaction. God shows us that in the Bible. Many people whose lives have been transformed by the power of God will advise you against sin. Those who have been Christians for many years will all tell you that it is the best way of life. For your own good, we urge you to profit from the experiences of others. There is no need for you to find out first hand sin does not pay.”

Alvin Reed, In *Christian Courier*, Clearmont, Mo.

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