

REMOVING THE PAIN

By

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Christ's offer of a cross does not appeal to a soft generation like ours, which places comfort above character and convenience above godly consecration. Therefore, today's formula for establishing churches and building institutions is not the same as that used by Christ in calling men to God.

Jesus forewarned us that in becoming His disciples there is a price to be paid. That price includes the world's hatred and persecution, tribulations to endure, temptations to resist, losses to be sustained and trials to suffer. His advice was that one should count the cost before embarking on the adventure. The rich young ruler was to give everything away. Nicodemus must start life all over. Paul had to endure the thorn in the flesh, and his Christian contemporaries were subject to continual persecution with many being martyred.

Jesus was a "man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." He suffered denial, false accusation, sorrow, grief, isolation and crucifixion. He challenged the apostles, "Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" (Matt. 20:22). He emptied the cup of pain and was obedient unto death, before it could be said that He had learned obedience by the things He had suffered (Heb. 5:8).

In contrast to His way, our own generation has been carefully trained to avoid any kind of pain. We have appliances of every description to take the pain out of work, a pill for every physical pain, and a psychological escape route for any mental anguish.

Jesus said, "If any man would come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matt. 16:24). Such self-denial is rejected out-of-hand by the "me generation." To willingly undergo the pain of a cross is surely a sign of psychosis. Instead of self-denial the church offers self-gratification — Christ will make you successful; He wants you to be healthy and wealthy; we offer a variety of programs so you need never know solitude or isolation; and these programs are patterned after the world, so you may never notice that you have been called out of the world into the community of the saints.

This painless-discipleship pitch has been so successful that the first time the disciple has to face a real trial or confront the world's opposition, it is a shock to his faith. Some begin to question the reality of Christ's promises of peace. Others assume that they have failed and live under a cloud of guilt and despair. The church now adds professional counselors who can step in to smooth over these rough spots so the trials can be borne without pain.

But when philosophy or psychology are employed to remove the pain and burden of discipleship, they also remove the means of growth in faith, patience and godliness. The result is a form of religion without the power of genuine faith, a facade of Christian commitment but without inner strength.

Many Christians are discouraged even more by the TV and Mega-Church preachers who present glamorous programs featuring stars of screen and sports telling their success stories to imply that everything comes up roses if you only have faith. But

the real faith is found among those who are meek and poor in spirit, who have nothing of the world's fame and fortune, and whose courage under fire from the enemy is known only to God. Material prosperity gives neither security nor peace but only temptation and danger. Jesus warned against seeking material prosperity, as it tends to draw one farther and farther away from the true riches. Then why should evangelists promise it and encourage people to seek it? You know the answer.

If being Christian means success and prosperity, then it must mean health as well. After listening to the faith healers and false claims of popular evangelists, many sick people conclude that they are sick because they don't have enough faith. This is not only false, but is seriously damaging, leaving many with a burden of doubt and fear. Not only must they suffer the illness, but they must suffer the bitterness of feeling like second-class Christians, and their faith is further weakened.

Sickness is not a sign of weak faith. It is a sign of our mortality, which will not be remedied until the resurrection, when every saint will be endowed with immortality, to be impervious to pain and death. Paul acknowledged that his physical weakness, which he called a "thorn in the flesh," was not going to be healed but would serve as a means to strengthen him in faith. "For when I am weak then am I strong" (II Cor. 12:10).

Self-denial and suffering is not martyrdom but spiritual surgery to which the believer willingly submits in order to have the diseased emotions amputated and tumors of sin excised. He does not suffer to be seen of others, nor does he seek the pain. The opposite is true. His suffering no man knows and no man could understand it if he knew. Should someone advise the Christian to give up the suffering and cross over to the sunny side of the street, he would have to try to explain that his suffering is due to walking on the sunny side.

The apostles who slept while Jesus prayed knew nothing of the tears and sweat in His time of agony. The world understands even less the nature of love that requires the pain of repentance and self-denial. Since discipleship cannot be divorced from the cross, many devices are used to block off the pain. The church which applies these pain-killing techniques may appear to be highly successful, but it may be hindering its members from growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus and denying them a glorious reward. "For our light affliction, which is for the moment, works for us more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory" (II Cor. 4:17).

Some suffering is inevitable for the child of God. The way of Christ is diametrically opposed to the way of the world, and as long as we follow Him we will be seen as enemies of the natural goals and activities of man. A prime example is the way Christians are accused of bigotry, narrowness and hatred when we take the side of God against the evil of homosexuality. Church leaders who covet the esteem of the world cater to the world's pressure and either give consent to this evil or cowardly remain silent. How often has this burning issue been addressed from the pulpit where you attend, and how well are the youth of the church instructed in God's truth regarding the matter? However fervently a preacher presents the gospel, unless he addresses the critical moral issue that is facing the people, he is not fighting the good fight nor declaring the whole counsel of God. We must remember the words of Jesus to those of His day who compromised the truth: "You are they that justify yourselves in the sight of men; but God knows your hearts: for that which is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God" (Luke 16:15).

All believers fail in some way or make serious mistakes. “For in many things we all stumble,” wrote James (James 3:2). One may then spend many hours trying to understand how he could have gone wrong, why it happened, and wondering what the effects will be. Sometimes a person who is fighting this guilt and fear will say, “I don’t believe God hears my prayers.”

Job had this feeling when he said, “I cry in the day and I rise in the night, but He hears me not” (Job 30:20). But, of course, God heard every word. We have the sure promise of Jesus that He hears us and that He will abide with us at all times. “Lo, I am with you always...” (Matt. 28:20).

This is a trial of faith. How can we know God hears us, when the pain continues? Only by faith — because He *said* He would hear. At the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus prayed, “I thank you for hearing me, and I knew that you hear me always: but because of the multitude that stands around I said it, that they may believe that you sent me” (John 11:42). We, too, can know that God always hears us.

Just as our salvation is a matter of faith, so is our assurance that God is ever with us, that whatever the circumstance and however painful it may be, we are never alone. By faith we believe that through such suffering we are being molded and tempered as the Creator desires, and in this faith comes true peace and joy (Rom. 15:13).

“For it is God who works in you both to will and to work, according to His good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13). His pleasure will be our glory and joy in the resurrection.

“We are heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified with him” (Rom. 8:17).

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