

The Sufferings of Christ

Part I

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Many years ago I heard a very mature pastor share this story. One of the women in his church was dying of cancer and for months the church members were praying for her healing, anointing her with oil, and doing everything they knew to see her healed. But not only did she not get better, she continued to decline. The pastor began to pray and earnestly seek God's will concerning her sickness. He asked God to tell him how to pray when he visited her. The Lord answered his prayer.

When he entered her hospital room, he took her hand and said, "Sister, I'm not here to pray for your healing, I'm just here to strengthen your spirit." Tears welled up in the woman's eyes as she said, "Pastor, I'm so glad to hear you say that! I know all these dear saints are praying for my healing but God has told me He is taking me home and I'm ready to go! It's such a relief to know someone understands." She died a short time later.

Over the years, as I've thought about this story, I've come to believe that this dear woman was partaking in the sufferings of Christ as part of her death journey. But how can that be? Why do we need to suffer when Christ's suffering and death paid the complete price for mankind's redemption? And, for that matter, why did Christ need to suffer at all before His death?

I pray that this writing will deepen our understanding of Christ's sufferings. I pray also that this teaching will provide us with better understanding and comfort when we or those we love suffer.

Contradictory Teaching

Frankly, the teaching set forth in this article is at odds with much of my earlier understanding of what the benefits of a Christian life are. Every teaching I have ever heard in both church and Bible school positively affirmed that Jesus is my healer and deliverer. I have seen many people healed and delivered. In fact, I myself have been healed many times by our Lord. Nearly forty years ago He healed me of terminal cancer so I know and understand the meaning of "Jesus is our healer and deliverer."

Still, down through the years I have continued to read troubling verses in the Bible that I didn't understand. Verses such as, "Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church." (Col 1:24 NIV) Often as I read verses such as this one I would pray, "Lord, please give me understanding of what this means."

To add to my confusion, over the years I've witnessed many gracious, mature, godly believers who suffered dreadfully. I would pray fervently along with other Christians for their deliverance, sometimes for months and even years. Of course the Lord delivered

many from their sufferings. But many others were not healed. During the past thirty years I believe I have come to at least a measure of understanding of all this and I want to share it in this teaching.

Suffering Defined

Webster's dictionary defines suffering as, "the bearing or undergoing of pain, distress, or injury." We all know people who have suffered physical pain from injuries or diseases. This kind of suffering is usually easy to see. But there are also invisible pains and invisible injuries. They include emotional and mental sufferings. These kinds of suffering can and usually are more hidden. They become visible only when the severity of the suffering gets so great that it begins to affect the outward behavior of the one suffering. So as we continue through the subject, remember that suffering can be physical, mental, emotional, or even spiritual. And it can be visible or invisible.

Sources of Suffering

As I see it, there are several sources of suffering. Let's look at them.

1. Sin

My Own Sin - First we often suffer because of our own sinful actions. Peter specifically addressed this type of suffering. He wrote, "For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. *But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it?* But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God." (1 Pe 2:19,20 NIV, emphasis added.)

I have known Christians who cause trouble to themselves, in their families, in their churches and everywhere else by sinning, meddling in other people's affairs, and so on. Eventually the consequences of their behavior catches up with them as other Christians turn away from them. Can they say, "I am suffering for Jesus. . . This is my cross and I must bear it."? Nonsense! They are suffering because of their own sinful conduct!

The Sins of Others - There are also circumstances that cause us to suffer because of the sins of others. A drunk driver hitting and hurting or even killing a loved family member is this kind of circumstance. Less dramatic but nonetheless real is the suffering caused to family members by a drunken and/or abusive husband or wife. Sadly, the list of these kinds of sins is almost endless.

2. Self-Will

Or we can bring on our own suffering by simply going our own way. I don't see this as necessarily willful sin on our part, just part of the learning process. In our humanness, we often make life plans without seeking God's direction. Such plans will almost certainly be at odds with what God has for our lives. Proverbs 19:21 tells us, "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails." (NIV) In these cases He simply allows us to come to the end of ourselves. Or He brings circumstances to bear that force a change. Most often when we find ourselves in these circumstances we don't have the divine perspective to see what is wrong. We have no idea we've done something wrong or made a decision apart from His will. We simply endure the pain and frustration. This is a waste of the experience. I believe that always in our suffering, we should go to our loving Father and seek answers to the "why" of what's going on.

3. Natural World

Then there is the kind of suffering that is brought on simply because we live in this world and are subject to God's laws of nature. Countless believers and unbelievers alike have suffered because of wild fires, floods, earthquakes, and so on. This kind of suffering is no one's fault, it happens because we are all subject to natural disasters. I don't believe God personally causes any individual disaster, although He certainly has the power and right to do so in an individual case as we saw in the great flood during Noah's lifetime.

4. Satan

John tells us in John 10:10 that, "The thief comes only to steal, kill and destroy . . ." (NIV) He is describing the works of the devil, Satan. Some Christians disregard the work of demonic forces to their own peril. The Apostle Paul had to fight Satan! He wrote to the church in Thessalonica. "For we wanted to come to you – certainly I, Paul, did, again and again – but Satan stopped us." (1 Th 2:18 NIV) Anyone who is walking in the ways of the Lord will, from time to time, need to enter into spiritual warfare.

The same holds true for our churches. It is reasonable to think that any church in the world that is truly walking with God will experience satanic/demonic interference, at least from time to time. Some people join a church because they love the Lord and God sent them there. But the devil sends other people to cause problems in the church. Have you ever seen a church begin to experience strife and contention soon after a certain person joined it? Somehow this person seems to be involved in most of the problems the church has. The parable of the wheat and tares tells us that all of the people in our churches aren't Christians.

Or the problems brought into a church by the devil aren't strife and contention, but rather sickness, poverty, discouragement, and so on. The only way to discern the devil's work in a church is through

concentrated prayer. God will quickly reveal the devil's work to sincere inquiring pastors and elders.

Jesus gave us authority over all the devil's power. (See Luke 10:19.) We need not tolerate the devil's handiwork in our lives or churches.

5. Suffering According to God's Will

Then there is suffering according to God's will. Peter wrote, "So then, those who *suffer according to God's will* should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good." (1 Pe 4:19 NIV, emphasis added.)

There are times in a Christian's life when God Himself allows or even brings circumstances to bear that cause suffering. We think to ourselves, "Why does God do this? I thought He is our loving, kind Protector." He *is* our loving, kind Protector. Still, He can see into the future. He can see when we are on a path that will lead to great pain or even destruction. Or He can see how our suffering can win someone else to Christ. We also know that one major work of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer is to conform him or her to the image of Christ. One of the Holy Spirit's tools is our personal suffering.

Let me share one occasion in my own life to make the point. Early in our marriage, Carolyn and I began to have severe financial difficulties. I had always generated money easily. Before we married Carolyn was a practicing attorney and had earned a good income so there was no logical reason for it. We weren't overspending and we were more than tithing but still our money seemed to just dry up.

Since we were doing all we knew to do in the Lord's word I concluded that the problem was the devil. So I began to rebuke the devil and demand that he get his stinking hands off our finances. Carolyn agreed and joined me in this attack against the enemy.

About a month passed. There were no changes in our finances and I was feeling frustrated. One day as Carolyn and I were praying, she looked at me and said, "This is not the devil, is it?" "No," I replied. Then she said, "In fact, this is God, isn't it?" "Yes," I admitted!

There was no way around it! We had spent a month rebuking the devil but it was like punching a pillow. There was nothing there! During that time the Holy Spirit made it quite clear that our financial problems were His doing! He was accomplishing a work in us together as husband and wife and he was using our money problems as the chosen tool. As that work was accomplished the problem slowly lifted.

So when you are having serious problems, be they health, financial, or whatever, let me encourage you to pray and ask the Lord what the source of the problem is. When the answer becomes clear to you, act accordingly.

The Chosen Few

Finally, I have come to believe that God has called certain believers to suffer for the sake of Christ in a way that most of the rest of us will never experience. I

believe the Apostle Paul falls into this category. When God spoke to Ananias, the Damascus disciple whom He sent to pray for the blinded Saul, He said,

I will show him how much *he must suffer for my name.* (Acts 9:16 NIV, emphasis added.)

The martyrs down through the ages have suffered very directly for their faith. And this kind of suffering continues today in countless countries throughout the world. As I have said, most of the rest of us will never be called to suffer like these dear saints. I believe they have a special standing with our Lord and reap special rewards for all eternity.

Why Did Christ Need to Suffer?

As believers we all recognize that central to God's plan of redemption of mankind was the life, death and resurrection of His son, Jesus. We know the Scriptures describing the final hours of Jesus' life. He suffered horribly. His suffering was mental, emotional and physical in the extreme. Because God's plan of redemption is perfect, we must accept that part of His plan was for Jesus to suffer. But why? Wasn't his death at the hands of His enemies enough? Let's look at what Scripture has to say on this question.

1. Jesus Learned Obedience Through His Suffering

“During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, *he learned obedience from what he suffered* and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him . . .” (Heb 5:7-9 NIV, emphasis added.)

Often as we look at Jesus' life and the things He did, experienced and suffered, we tend to minimize the impact by thinking, “Well, that was Jesus. After all, He is God.” But to fully appreciate His pain we need to remind ourselves that He was also a *man*. He had the same feeling for pain and emotional trauma as the rest of mankind.

If Jesus had to learn obedience through suffering, how do you think *we* are to learn obedience . . . ?

2. He Was Perfected Through Suffering

Not only did Jesus learn obedience through suffering, we note from the Scripture we just quoted that He went on to attain *perfection* through his suffering. The writer of Hebrews refers to this again. “In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should *make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering.*” (Heb 2:10 NIV, emphasis added.)

Remember, this is the *human* Jesus who needed to attain perfection.

3. He Became the Source of Eternal Salvation

In one and two above, we see that Jesus learned obedience and was perfected through suffering. To quote Hebrews, 5 again,

“During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, *he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him . . .*” (Heb 5:7-9 NIV, emphasis added.)

Reverent submission in this verse means *obedience*, doesn't it? His *obedience* and *perfection* qualified Him to become the *source of eternal salvation for all of us!* Thus we see that Jesus had to suffer to learn obedience, in order to be perfected, thus to become fully qualified to be the author of eternal salvation! Jesus attained all of this through His suffering and it was His loving Father who ordained it.

How Did Christ Suffer?

1. He Suffered Rejection

Has someone you loved ever rejected you? Words are unable to describe the emotional agony suffered through rejection of someone we love. Emotionally speaking it is one of the most painful of human experiences.

Jesus' own family rejected Him, the townspeople He lived and worked among rejected Him, the very people to whom the Father had sent Him, Israel, rejected Him. Finally His own disciples rejected and abandoned Him when He was arrested.

2. He was Misunderstood

Jesus came to an earthly people speaking heavenly truths. Most of the religious leaders of that day failed to understand Him. Even His disciples, as much as they loved Him, did not truly understand Him. For example, remember John, 6? Jesus said, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.” (Jn 6:54 NIV) We have the advantage of looking back to the truth Jesus was speaking and we understand what He was saying. Yet John tells us that because of this teaching many of His disciples turned back and no longer followed Him. (See Jn 6:66.)

3. He Suffered Verbal Attacks

Most all of us understand the pain of verbal abuse. I recall the name-calling my young playmates engaged in when I was a child. Their words were hurtful. In the adult world such words are at least as hurtful. Now think of the

verbal abuse that Jesus endured. Here is just one example. It happened when He was speaking to a crowd.

The Jews answered him, "Aren't we right in saying that you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed?" "I am not possessed by a demon," said Jesus, "but I honor my Father and you dishonor me. I am not seeking glory for myself; but there is one who seeks it, and he is the judge. I tell you the truth, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death." At this the Jews exclaimed, "Now we know that you are demon-possessed! Abraham died and so did the prophets, yet you say that if anyone keeps your word, he will never taste death. Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?" (Jn 8:48-53 NIV)

4. He Was Tempted

All of us understand the power of temptation. We also understand the consequences of yielding to that temptation! Jesus was a man subject to the same temptations that you and I are. Scripture says, ". . . we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin." (Heb 4:15 NIV)

In Matthew, 4 we have the account of the devil's temptation of Jesus. This had to be a most severe testing! After fasting for 40 days, the devil even used Scripture to lure Jesus from the path God sent Him to walk. The devil has never tempted me to jump from a high place to see if God would send angels to catch me! He has never tempted me to turn stone into bread! Yet the enemy of my soul *has* lured me into self-serving temptations many times!

5. He Was Lied About

Proverbs tell us that, "A truthful witness does not deceive, but a false witness pours out lies." (Pro 14:5 NIV) Imagine finding yourself in a court of law with your life at stake. Then imagine witnesses coming forward telling lies intended to condemn you to death!

Jesus faced this very situation. The Jewish leaders were trying to condemn Him to death.

But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward and declared, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.'" (Mat 26:60-61 NIV)

6. He Was Severely Beaten

Finally, Jesus was beaten physically for hours before they crucified Him! Have you ever seen someone who was severely beaten in the face? I have. It's not pretty. The prophet Isaiah, speaking by the Spirit, gives us a sense of what Jesus looked like. "Just as there were many who were appalled at him – his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness – . . ." (Isa 52:14 NIV)

It is almost overwhelming when we focus on all the ways Jesus suffered for our sakes. Only the perfect love of our God can explain the incredible gift of salvation to each of us and the price Jesus paid for it. Blessed be His name!

In Part II we will examine how we are called to suffer as Christ suffered. We will also see the many benefits that flow from our suffering.

[We have additional teaching on suffering and healing entitled, *A Biblical View of Suffering*, and *A Biblical View of Healing*. They may be downloaded and printed from our website at www.hundredfold.org.]

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