

THE MEANING OF SUFFERING IN THE LIFE OF A CHRISTIAN

THE WORLD is continually perplexed by the problem of human suffering — "WHY?"

I. SUFFERING MAKES US HUMBLE

Long periods of unbroken health and prosperity are not always the best for man. Man has a tendency to feel a little too secure and a little too self-sufficient, and consequently forgets God. He has a tendency to forget that he is mortal, or, at least he postpones it from his mind. He forgets that his life is very, very frail and fragile, and that it is constantly lived on the brink of eternity. It seems that it is during the periods of man's greatest prosperity that he becomes the most wicked.

From the Creation to the Flood the life span of man approached a thousand years, with Methuselah having the oldest recorded age of 969 years. But after the Flood the average age of man fell back to about what it is today. There have been various attempts to explain this. The Bible doesn't say, but could one of the reasons be that man's life was shortened so he would recognize his need of God more? During this period of time when men lived so long, they became exceedingly wicked—so wicked that God destroyed the world with a universal flood. Men of the world tend to leave God off until late in life. And living so long, man would become so hardened and depraved that he would not turn to God at all in his later years.

The Laodiceans illustrate our point of being a little too self-sufficient. The Lord's indictment against them was, **Revelation 3:17-18** 'Because you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, 18 I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire, that you may become rich, and white garments, that you may clothe yourself, and [that] the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see. (NASB) Prosperity had not helped this church spiritually.

However, misfortune and suffering make us humble. It makes us realize that we are the sin-cursed creature, and not the Creator. It makes us realize as the flower of the grass we soon fade away; that nothing in this old world is permanent, not even man. It is said of king Manasseh of Judah, as he was being taken into Babylonian captivity, **2 Chronicles 33:12** And when he was in distress, he entreated the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. (NASB) Suffering makes us humble.

In the Psalms we read this fitting prayer of David: **Psalms 39:4-6** "LORD, make me to know my end, And what is the extent of my days, Let me know how transient I am. 5 "Behold, Thou hast made my days [as] handbreadths, And my lifetime as nothing in Thy sight, Surely every man at his best is a mere breath. Selah. 6 "Surely every man walks about as a phantom; Surely they make an uproar for nothing; He amasses [riches], and does not know who will gather them. (NASB) Recognizing man's frailty and brevity of life makes us humble. Experiencing suffering brings these truths home to us in a very personal way.

The apostle Paul had some kind of physical infirmity which he calls his "thorn in the flesh." He asked the Lord to take it away three times, but God did not honor his request. Suffering this infirmity would be one means God would use to keep him humble (II Corinthians 12:7-10).

Christian, let us learn the lesson of humility from suffering, being made very much aware of just how weak and fragile we really are. Let us learn to depend upon the Lord, and live for eternity. "Is any among you afflicted? Let him pray" (James 5:13a). **1 Peter 5:6-7** Humble yourselves, therefore,

under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, 7 casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you. (NASB)

II. SUFFERING PURIFIES AND PERFECTS

Within all of us there are imperfections, there is dross, and there may be secret sins that need to be gotten rid of. Our consecration may not be complete. Suffering purifies us like the smelting process of ores. Peter refers to this when he speaks : **1 Peter 1:7** that the proof of your faith, [being] more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; (NASB) Just as the gold is refined to a greater stage of purity, suffering purifies the Christian. We are brought face to face with ourselves (just who and how weak we are), our sins, and our God. Purification takes place as we repent.

Peter also wrote, **1 Peter 4:1-2** Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, 2 so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God. (NASB) In suffering we are able to get our values straightened out and see everything in the proper perspective, see the things that really count in life (like loving and serving God with all of our hearts).

Then Peter also further wrote, **1 Peter 5:10** And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen [and] establish you. (NASB) Suffering, whether it be from persecution or otherwise, will lead to all of these things being accomplished in our lives if we will but let it.

And to further emphasize what we are saying, examine **Hebrews 12:5-11.** and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, Nor faint when you are reprov'd by Him; 6 For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, And He scourges every son whom He receives. " 7 It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom [his] father does not discipline? 8 But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. 9 Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? 10 For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He [disciplines us] for [our] good, that we may share His holiness. 11 All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. (NASB)

Beloved, let us have the proper attitude toward our suffering. If we let Him, God will use it for our eternal well being. It purifies. It helps us develop character. With the Psalmist of old we can cry out, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes" (**Psalms 119:71**). With Paul we can testify that **Romans 5:3-5** And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; 4 and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; 5 and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. (NASB)

III. SUFFERING MAKES US COMPASSIONATE

One who has experienced suffering has a feeling toward the suffering of others that he never had before. He may have before shown concern, and even sympathy, toward those fallen into adverse circumstances. But once he has suffered, his feelings turn into compassion. He personally knows what his fellow human being is enduring, and his heart goes out to him. That is why Christians, as members

of the same body, should have deep feelings for one another. **1 Corinthians 12:26** And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if [one] member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. (NASB)

We can see this truth in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is now our faithful high priest in heaven, interceding on our behalf. Under the Old Testament, to qualify, the high priest had to be taken from among his brethren. Jesus became flesh and blood and lived among us. **Hebrews 2:17-18** Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. 18 For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted. (NASB) **Hebrews 4:15-16** For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as [we are, yet] without sin. 16 Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need. (NASB) Jesus suffered in the flesh. Jesus was tempted to sin. That being the case, we know that he has deep feelings of compassion toward us.

And, after we have suffered, we have a deeper feeling of compassion toward Jesus. Just think what an awful death he died on the cross of Calvary that we might be saved from our sins and their consequence! We are made to love him even more. Praise His Name!

It is good that through suffering we can come to have more compassion for our fellow human beings. This is God's will.

IV. SUFFERING MAKES US THANKFUL

Many times we are not thankful. We really don't know how to be thankful. We have always had good health and lived in an affluent society. But once suffering comes, that picture is changed. We stop and count our blessings. We are made to realize just how good God has been to us. We are more thankful for the Savior. We learn to appreciate and enjoy even the little things in life.

God wants Christians to be a thankful people. There is nothing more obnoxious than the ingrate. Suffering cannot be all bad when it makes us be more thankful.

As we bring these thoughts to a close, we ask, what does suffering personally mean to you? What it means to you, whether it will be a blessing or not, will all be determined by you (as you keep your faith and the right attitude). Let us take the Lord Jesus as our personal example as we face suffering. He prayed, **Matthew 26:29** "But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom." (NASB) Then if God does not see to answer our prayer in the affirmative, let us pray with Jesus, **Matthew 26:42** He went away again a second time and prayed, saying, "My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Thy will be done." (NASB) Being resigned to God's will, let us get all of the spiritual good that we can out of our suffering. Remember **Romans 8:28** And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to [His] purpose. (NASB) Also remember this blessed promise: **Hebrews 13:5** Let your character be free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, "I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you."