

SOME THOUGHTS ON SUFFERING

By Ashby L. Camp

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1. The world is full of suffering and hardship, and Christians are not exempt from it. In the N.T. we can see that they suffer persecution (2 Cor. 11:23-27), extreme poverty (2 Cor. 8:2), illness (1 Cor. 11:30; 2 Cor. 12:7; 1 Tim. 5:23), and death (1 Thess. 4:13; 1 Cor. 11:30).

2. When undergoing suffering, the first question we need to ask is "Am I being disciplined?" In other words, is the Lord trying to convict me of some sin in my life so that I will repent?

a. Scripture is clear that God works this way. For example:

(1) Amos 4:6-11 - God repeatedly brought hardship on the people of Israel to get them to repent, but they would not listen.

(2) 1 Cor. 11:27-32 - Because some were participating in the Supper without appreciating the body (i.e., they were maintaining social divisions), because they had not been examining themselves in that regard, God had permitted sickness and death to come upon the community, but he had done so as a form of discipline. He was trying to get them to correct what they were doing wrong.

b. As the writer says in Heb. 3:13: "But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by *sin's deceitfulness*."

(1) Sin deceives us in that it hardens our hearts to the reality of its presence. We may know intellectually that certain behavior, speech, or attitudes are wrong but fail to identify those things in our own lives.

(2) Consider King David. In 2 Samuel 11 David sleeps with Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, and then plots to have Uriah killed in battle. He certainly knew that this was wrong, but the deceitfulness of sin kept him from applying that knowledge to his own conduct. It wasn't until 2 Samuel 12 when Nathan confronted David that he was brought to conviction. He told him a story in which David could see the wrong and then announced to him, "You are the man!"

(3) Suffering may be "an angel" sent to tell you "You are the man."

3. *BUT* not all suffering is discipline for sin. Job makes that quite clear. Job was suffering because God permitted Satan to strike him in order that Job might glorify God by maintaining his faith in the face of suffering. He was chosen to represent the faithful so to speak, but none of this was known by Job. So honestly examine your life when you're suffering, but don't insist on finding what is not there.

4. If when you examine your life you are convicted of sin, you must repent. Repentance is different from being convicted of the need to change. Being convicted, being cut to the heart, being sorry for our failure, merely sets the stage for repentance; it puts one in the valley of decision. The question then becomes whether we will fully resolve in our hearts to change.

a. Peter made this distinction between conviction and repentance clear in Acts 2:37-38. The people were cut to the heart by his sermon, they were convicted of their offense, and wanted to know what to do. Peter instructed them to *repent* and be baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

b. In 2 Cor. 7:8-10 Paul also made clear the distinction between seeing the need to change and actually committing to change. In that text, he reflects on the fact that his previous harsh letter had made the Corinthians sorry for the things they had been doing, but he rejoiced in the fact that their sorrow had led them to repentance. Conviction of wrong was a precursor, a predicate, to repentance.

5. If examination of your life in the midst of suffering does not produce conviction of sin, then you need to remember the truth that God can do anything. As the angel declared in Lk. 1:37, "nothing is impossible with God." If he *chooses* to relieve your suffering, whatever it may be, he can do so.

a. Satan will use our suffering, especially if it is prolonged, to try to persuade us that we are beyond God's ability to help. He wants to extinguish our hope that we can be delivered so that we will quit seeking relief from God.

b. Luke 8 a synagogue ruler named Jairus pleads with Jesus to come and heal his dying daughter. While they are on the way, someone from Jairus' house arrives and tells him, "Your daughter is dead. Don't bother the teacher anymore." The message was that the problem had now become too difficult for Jesus; leave him alone. Jesus would have none of it; he told Jairus, "Don't be afraid; just believe, and she will be healed," which of course, she was.

6. Given that God can relieve our suffering if he chooses to, we need to remember several things:

a. We must not give up praying for relief. According to Lk. 18:1, the Parable of the Persistent Widow is specifically told "to show [the disciples] that they should always pray and not give up." I realize that Paul only prayed three times to have his thorn removed, but he had a direct word from God that his grace was sufficient for him.

b. In praying for this, however, we must pray with a heart of submission to God's will. Just as Jesus prayed in the Garden before his crucifixion, we must have the attitude of "not my will but yours be done." If God chooses not to relieve our suffering, even though we do not understand why, we will accept his will for our lives.

(1) This involves trusting that God has a benevolent purpose in permitting us to suffer. This is sometimes hard to hang on to in our pain, but as I've said before, the cross of Christ shouts across the centuries that God is our greatest benefactor, not our enemy.

(2) In *The Hiding Place*, Corrie ten Boom relates an incident that happened after she and her sister, Betsy, had been transferred to Ravensbruck, a horrible Nazi prison camp. On entering the barracks, they found them over-crowded and totally flea infested. That morning, after reading the admonition in 1 Thessalonians to give thanks in all circumstances, Betsy told Corrie to stop and give thanks for every detail of their new living quarters. Corrie refused to give thanks for the fleas, but after Betsy persisted, she finally gave in. During the months at that camp they were surprised to find how openly they could hold Bible study and prayer meetings without guard interference. Several months later they learned that the reason the guards would not enter the barracks was because of the fleas.

c. Accepting that God may call us to suffer for his purpose, just as in Jn. 21:18-19 Peter was called to die a painful death for God's glory, we need to pray without ceasing for strength to endure our suffering.

d. As long as God permits us to suffer, our attitude is to be one of thankfulness (1 Thess. 5:18) and joy (Jas. 1:2-4). We can do this because we know that in all things he is working for the good of those who love him (Rom. 8:28). We don't want the suffering, but if he chooses that path for us we will accept his will with thankfulness and joy, knowing that he is God.

7. The church's response to a brother's or sister's suffering is one of compassion and sympathy. We are not to belittle their hardship by quoting Rom. 8:28.