

THE MYSTERY AND MINISTRY OF SUFFERING

This dispensation which lies between the first and second coming of Christ is blessed with a wealth of spiritual blessings beyond all past times. The work on the cross has opened up to faith the treasures of the Godhead. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit gives to each believer joy and peace without measure. Our risen and glorified Savior and Lord's ministry of love for all his own who have the hope of endless life. A finished redemption and a complete Bible which tells us of the mystery of the Church and boundless grace. We are given a blessed hope of the coming of our Lord Jesus, filling the future with the promise of eternal glory.

But side by side with this display of love and grace, this dark mysterious fact that this present age is peculiarly an age of suffering. This fact is revealed in scripture, but when it happens to us it baffles all human wisdom and brings the sufferer face to face with a mystery too deep for comprehension.

That God should do so much on the one hand by blessing us with spiritual blessing in heavenly places in Christ Jesus, and yet do so little on the other by removing some present grief or restoring physical health to a beloved suffering one. One could perhaps point out that our present medical knowledge helps many people to be able to overcome many ailments. However I would point out that that is a mercy that helps both believers and unbelievers, or as we call it "common grace". We are exhorted to pray for ourselves and other believers, but I believe that we should always say "If the Lord wills". And in many cases, the Lord answers those prayers. But in many cases there is no healing or as in our dear brother Steve who is blind. However, many a saint is brought to the brink of despair and seem to give the scoffer a good reason for his unbelief and scorn. What a powerful testimony if one who is suffering can do it with a cheerful and trusting spirit, giving the Lord praise through it. We remember our brother Carl Fisher in the Minneapolis assembly who was confined to a wheel chair because of an accident that left him a paraplegic. He would tell others that he was thankful for that because he might never have listened to and believed the gospel and so would have been eternally lost. He spoke of a life lived in carelessness but this accident at work put him in the hospital and Ted Koch and another brother visited him there and brought him the good news of salvation through faith in the Lord Jesus. So in all this, he gave God the glory. That was a powerful testimony.

Let's look back upon the last dispensation and the mystery deepens. The spiritual blessing were less and the love and grace were not revealed as they are now. Many men and women who feared God and served Him were often delivered from distressing circumstances and deadly diseases and blessed with an abundance of earthly good as a token of God's favor.

Looking forward into the future of the Millennium which was spoken about in the old testament scriptures, that will be a time of physical health and material good for the people of God in a more glorious manner than in the present time. People will have a long life span and nature will be wonderful without predators or disease. Sin will be promptly punished. The one who sinned

will be dead by morning. Thus crime will not cause the heartache and chaos that we endure now.

However now many people of faith enjoy good health and prosperity, but so do the unbelievers. Physical health or material good cannot be claimed as a mark of God's favor in this present age. That is why the prosperity gospel is so wrong and hurtful. If a Christian is suffering, there is no word of comfort that can be given except to accuse the ailing saint of not having enough faith.

PAUL A SUFFERING APOSTLE

Paul was chosen as the apostle to the Gentiles. To him was revealed the mystery of the ages and through him was revealed the will of God for the Church from the laying of the foundation until the coming again of Christ Jesus the Lord.

Along with his conversion and call to the apostleship came the declaration from God "I will show him how great things he must suffer for My names sake", Acts 9:16, which Paul accepted as the purpose of his life. He speaks of it in every epistle. Romans 8:17 And if children, then heirs with Christ, if so be that we suffer with him, that we may also be glorified together. He puts suffering first as if it were the birthright purpose of every Christian. Just as if we were made children and heirs for this very purpose, that we might share in suffering with Christ, that we may be glorified together. Romans 8:18 For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed to us. John 15: 18 Jesus told his disciples "If the world hate you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you." Ephesians 6:12 "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places."

At Paul's conversion, the Jews soon lay in wait for him. They watched the gates day and night to kill him. His countrymen from then on could be counted upon to try to silence him at all costs. Phil 3:8 Paul says "For whom I have suffered the loss of all things. Paul had probably come from a noble Jewish family that was able to get him the best in training in Judaism with the greatest teachers and that he studied under Gamaliel. His high birth, his rare personal qualities, his attainments as a scholar ensured him a place in the society of the great and noble of earth. His zeal had carried him forward until he dared to challenge the powers of the Name of Jesus. Apparently he was driven out of his home and the affection of any of his family. Every door was closed against him. He was defamed and made as the filth of the world, the off-scouring of all things.

II Corinthians 11: 24-31 ²⁴ From the Jews five times I received forty *stripes* minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; ²⁶ *in* journeys often, *in* perils of waters, *in* perils of robbers, *in* perils of *my own* countrymen, *in* perils of the Gentiles, *in* perils in the city, *in* perils in the wilderness, *in* perils in the sea, *in* perils

among false brethren; ²⁷ in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness— ²⁸ besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn *with indignation*?

³⁰ If I must boast, I will boast in the things which concern my ⁱⁿfirmity. ³¹ The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying.

Every pain and wound prove the sufficiency of that grace and sweetness of that love from the heart of Jesus pierced for him. 11 Timothy 1: 16-18 ¹⁶ The Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chain; ¹⁷ but when he arrived in Rome, he sought me out very zealously and found *me*. ¹⁸ The Lord grant to him that he may find mercy from the Lord in that Day—and you know very well how many ways he ministered ^{to} *me* at Ephesus.:

Phil. 4: 18 ¹⁸ Indeed I ^{have} all and abound. I am full, having received from Epaphroditus the things *sent* from you, a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God.

11 Timothy 4: 16-18 ¹⁶ At my first defense no one stood with me, but all forsook me. May it not be charged against them. ¹⁷ But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that the message might be preached fully through me, and *that* all the Gentiles might hear. Also I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion. ¹⁸ And the Lord will deliver me from every evil work and preserve *me* for His heavenly kingdom. To Him *be* glory forever and ever.

What does suffering do for the Godly soul?

11 Corinthians 6: 3-10 We give no offense in anything, that our ministry may not be blamed. ⁴ But in all *things* we commend ourselves as ministers of God: in much ⁱⁿ patience, in tribulations, in needs, in distresses, ⁵ in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in fastings; ⁶ by purity, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Spirit, by ⁱⁿ sincere love, ⁷ by the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left, ⁸ by honor and dishonor, by evil report and good report; as deceivers, and *yet* true; ⁹ as unknown, and *yet* well known; as dying, and behold we live; as chastened, and *yet* not killed; ¹⁰ as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and *yet* possessing all things.

It is sad that some Christians treated Paul almost as Job's friends treated him. Perhaps they thought that his message was not from the Lord because of the many troubles Paul

had as he went about preaching the gospel. Maybe he had some unconfessed sin that he was so persecuted. Or they might have said that he shouldn't say controversial things that just inflamed his enemies. Or maybe he shouldn't talk so much about God's righteous judgment, hell and sin and more about the relationship we have with the Lord Jesus. Most of us do look with disdain at those who are in trouble all the time, but the Corinthians did not realize that Satan was trying to negate the words of the apostle.

How does suffering benefit our souls?

By means of suffering there is an intimacy established between the soul and God, which in turn procures for the Christian an experience of joy and gladness which far surpasses the mirth and pleasures of this world. Suffering does not perfect our bodies but the spiritual part of our being that develops the fruit of the spirit.

Gal 5: 22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. ²⁴ And those *who are* Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. ²⁶ Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another. Love, joy, and peace could be the result of happy and peaceful conditions, but longsuffering and patience speaks of a burden of care, or grief and pain in ourselves or a loved one that only grows in the soil of tribulation. Hence it is evident that suffering of some kind is necessary for our perfecting as Christians, and for bring forth of the precious fruit of the Spirit.

How does suffering benefit in relation to others?

Suffering is given us in order that we may be able to bear the heavenly blessing of comfort to others who suffer. 1 Corinthians 1: 3-6 ³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. ⁵ For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ. ⁶ Now if we are afflicted, *it is* for your consolation and salvation, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer. Or if we are comforted, *it is* for your consolation and salvation. God is the source of all comfort, but it flows mostly through human channels. The Holy Spirit is the Comforter, but He operates through human instrumentality also. But to qualify for this Christ-like ministry we must have been comforted of God.

In all this Christ is our example. Heb. 2:10 For it was fitting for Him, for whom *are* all things and by whom *are* all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings. Heb 2: 18 For in that He Himself has

suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted. It is not possible that Christ could know what pain and grief were, apart from the experience through which he passed. We can never know the sufferings that he went through on the cross, but the sufferings through which he passed to fit Him to be Captain of our salvation and merciful High Priest, lasted a lifetime. While suffering is beneficial to the perfecting of our character, and for comforting of other Christians, but the best is a greater capacity for the enjoyment of fellowship with God in what He is in the excellency of His divine Person. He is the God of all grace, the God of patience and consolation, the God of love and peace, a God full of compassion and gracious, longsuffering, plenteous in mercy and truth.

Who will have the largest capacity to know God?

Those who have been enlarged and perfected down here amid suffering and sorrow of earth. Is not this the chief end of all discipline of our life in the world, namely the forming and enlarging of the human vessel, which for all eternity is to display the glory of God?

While living our lives here, do we not feel sorrow when we see the suffering of others or the sudden bereavement which falls upon some happy home turning a mother into a widow or a birth problem that leaves the family struggling to support a severely handicapped child. More perplexing is to see the moral wrongs which blight so many lives and breaks so many hearts leaving a shameful heritage. Let us not forget that He who numbers the hairs of our head and knows every sparrow that falls, holds in his hand the universe and weighs out to each the loss and gain, the bitter and sweet, among all things which work together for good to them that love God.

When the morning of the eternal day has dawned and all sorrow and pain shall be heard no more, and not till then shall we know the full meaning of all the suffering which in a mysterious way is meted out to saints of God today. The revelation of Jesus Christ shall proclaim to the universe the perfect wisdom of God, and the true value of the life of faith lived in this sinful world.

What should be our attitude toward suffering?

The result of suffering, profitable or otherwise, will be determined by the attitude we take toward it. Suffering may come upon us and bring us no blessing in this life, nor work out any weight of glory for the future. On the contrary, it may leave the subject of it soured and disappointed, fretting at the loss sustained with no enlargement of heart for God or spiritual things. On the other hand it may be received as a refining fire to purge away the dross of worldly-mindedness or as a means of cutting off some

unprofitable way of living so that we may give more earnest and undivided attention to those things which are above. Hebrews 12:11 Now no ⁹ chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Paul gloried in infirmities, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. 2 Corinthians 12: 9-10 And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Thousands have been tortured, not accepting deliverance so they might obtain a better resurrection. We are not left to choose whether we shall suffer. Afflictions and distresses will come sometime, but it is the attitude we take toward suffering that determines what the result will be.

Just now we see through a glass darkly. We know only in part, therefore we must submit, without murmuring. If we could see in light divine the perfect end of all, we would not alter, if we could, what God permits or wills to come to us. So we trust and watch, while evening darkens into night, until we hear the shout or enter into rest with those who are with the Savior. Rev. 21:4, 5 And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away."

⁵ Then He who sat on the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new." And He said ⁶ to me, "Write, for these words are true and faithful."