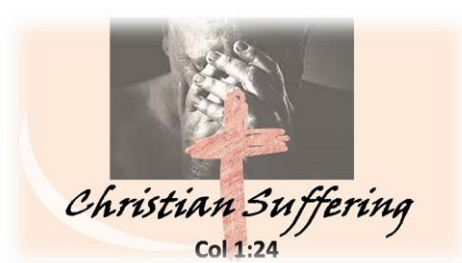


Christian Suffering (Col 1:24)

A lot of prayers went up for Scott. He was too young, only 39. Scott powerfully renewed his faith in Jesus. Eddie and Sonja are confident he is in God's presence now. That is the most important thing in life. Eddie shared the gospel at the memorial service, and Jesus was glorified. Still, the pain of loss is very real and the grief is deep.



Many have also suffered past two years of covid – some faced unfair dismissal from work, some suffered physical sickness, some went through very difficult court cases, and some have lost loved ones.

A. Faith = NO Suffering?

Does 'having enough faith' protect us from suffering? Isn't Jesus supposed to keep us from all suffering? Why do we become Christians? So, Jesus can eliminate all suffering and failure from our lives?

The truth is that we can minimise some unnecessary sufferings that spring from our sin and disobedience to God. We cannot eliminate all suffering even if we have mountain-moving faith. Another truth is that we all suffer at times the foolish and unnecessary suffering caused by our own folly. We will never be wise enough or holy enough to remove all foolishness from our lives.

How about apostle Paul? Arguably the greatest Christian that ever lived. The prophecy was given to him at his conversion (*Acts 9:16*), 'Go, for he is chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before the Gentiles ... for I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake.' How would you like a prophecy like that?

Right now, some 200 million Christians are suffering for Christ in various nations. Jesus said rejoice if you suffer for Him because you belong to a very special group of people – the true prophets of God. The Bible says this group of Christians will drastically increase in the last days.

Responding rightly to all kinds of suffering is important for you and me. *Col 1:24*, 'I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the affliction of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church.'

B. Destined to Suffer

- *1 Thess 3:3-4*, '...no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them. In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way...'
- *Phil 1:30*, 'For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him.'
- *James 1:2*, 'My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials.'

We ought to pray 'lead us not into temptations but deliver us from evil.' Yet we can be sure that at times we will fall into various trials and temptations in this life and suffer rightly or wrongly. It is very important that we know God is not angry with us, or is getting even with us. So even when it makes no sense to us, we can thank the Lord by faith, because one day we will be able to look back and truly thank Him for His wisdom and His ways in our lives. But that understanding will come in the future. Today we must respond in faith and trust the Lord and His ways.

Moses prayed, 'Now therefore, I pray, if I have found grace in Your sight, show me now Your way, that I may know You and that I may find grace in Your sight.' (*Ex 33:13*)

C. Purpose of Suffering

1. Spiritual Inheritance

1 Peter 1:3-7, 'to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you....In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honour, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ.'

There is a clear connection between Christian suffering, and purifying of our faith, which leads to our eternal spiritual inheritance in heaven. We are all called to this spiritual inheritance. There is no exception. But not all enter into it. The Bible says that many Christians will be saved as though escaping through the fire (1 Cor 3:15). They will be saved from hell, but they will have zero rewards. Why? They do not serve Christ, they do not respond rightly to suffering that comes their way, i.e., by faith in Christ.

2. Mysterious Reasons for Suffering

Col 1:24, 'I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the affliction of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church.'

Great suffering was appointed by God for Christ, called 'Christ's affliction.' And God has graciously apportioned a portion of 'Christ's suffering' to the body of Christ, to believers like you and me, so we can share with Christ in His suffering – 'what is lacking in the affliction of Christ.' We can call these - 'mysterious reasons for suffering.'

Very few would choose to suffer for Christ, so certain types of suffering come our way and find us in this life to challenge and purify our faith. These sufferings come in various packages - disappointments in life; betrayal, physical suffering, sudden loss of health, financial reversals, death of loved ones, then at the very top is the suffering for following Christ.

3. Sanctification

Heb 12:10-11, 'For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. Now no 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.'

God's chastening comes upon us so we partake in His holiness and yield the 'peaceable fruit of righteousness.' We experience a lot of internal tension, fretting, fear, and frustration until we are 'chastened by the Lord'. 'Chastening of the Lord' or 'discipline of the Lord' (παιδεύω) can mean 'enforced accelerated learning', or in Latin - the idea of purifying a child. Suffering is God's way of preparing us for eternity if we respond rightly to Him.

Ps 119:67, 'Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I keep Your word.' 'I used to wander off until you disciplined me; but now I closely follow your word.' (NLT)

4. Greater Anointing

Suffering is the way to greater anointing. It would be nice to have someone lay their hands on me and pass on all their anointing. But laying on of hands only transfers the seeds of the anointing. Maturity or the weight of the anointing comes through the way of suffering. Paul spoke of the Christian suffering – he calls it 'our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.' (2 Cor 4:17-18).

D. Privilege of Suffering

We are all appointed to suffering if we truly belong to God. There is a spiritual purpose behind every suffering though it may not be clear to us at the time. There is no such thing as meaningless suffering if we will respond rightly. Our suffering as God's people is not only purposeful and meaningful but also a privilege.

1. *Acts 5:40-41, 'And when they had called apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. So, they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.'*

Just a couple of months before this, Peter denied Jesus before a servant girl. Then he heard the rooster crow, and he wept his heart out. Peter failed so badly - he let God down, he let his best friend down. And the disciples scattered like sheep without a shepherd. Now God was giving them a second chance so fast, allowing them to publicly suffer for Christ after they had utterly betrayed Him. They rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer for His name.

Heb 11:24-26, '[Moses] esteemed the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt. Paul said,

Phil 3:10, 'that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death...'

2. Job suffered intensely. The great mental suffering behind Job's physical suffering was that he did not know why he was suffering so much. But Job knew his suffering wasn't because God was angry with him. God wasn't punishing him like his friends told him. They were sure Job was suffering because of some secret sin, and if he repented, God would stop punishing him.

Job defended his innocence tooth and nail. The angels were watching Job. The devil was watching Job. And God was watching Job. Job's friends were religious, but Job knew God. Job did not know – Job had no idea - that God was so proud of Job that He boasted about Job to Satan. Though Job didn't have a clue at the time - it was a privilege to suffer in that way for God. Job's suffering was completely in the will of God.

3. You might say, 'I am not apostle Peter. I am not Job. Why me, God?' And God might answer, 'Why not you?' You may have no idea what God thinks of you, or what you are capable of in the grace of God. One day we will all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. All saints from the past, including the apostles, prophets, Job, Abraham, etc will stand before God. Who will be the first? Luther? Calvin? Billy Graham?

General Principle: 'The higher the profile here on earth, the lower the profile in heaven. The lower the profile here on earth, the higher profile in heaven.'

Luke 16:15, 'What is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God.' Or 'What this world honours is detestable in the sight of God.' (NLT)

The people who will shine brightly before the judgment seat of Christ are likely those whom we've never heard of on earth - those who quietly suffered for Christ without complaining. Jesus will say, 'I saw your tears and I saw your pain, and how you did not deny my name, how you worshiped and praised the Lord through your pain in this life.'

Who do you think loves the Lord more? Those who suffered more for the Lord? Or those who suffered less?

4. *Henry C. Morrison*, a Baptist missionary who served in Africa for 40 years, decided to return home to New York. So, he sent three letters home that he is returning. As the ship docked in the harbour, he saw a band playing. He said to his wife, *'They shouldn't have done this.'* He was about to get off the ship first, but a policeman stopped him. It turned out that on the same ship was Theodore Roosevelt who went to Africa for 3 weeks of hunting game. The band was for Roosevelt.

Henry was the last man to get off the ship. When he put down his suitcases and look around, there was not a single soul who came to meet him. He found a cheap motel to stay the night with his wife. Deeply discouraged, Henry threw himself on the bed and cried, *'Lord, Roosevelt went to Africa for 3 weeks for a hunting game, and they play a band for him. I served You for 40 years in Africa, and I came home, and there is nobody here to welcome me.'*

Then Henry heard the voice of the Lord clear as a bell, *'But Henry, you are not home yet.'*

Paul said, *'no eye has seen, no ear heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.'* It will be worth it all when we see Jesus. Life's trials will seem so small when we see Him face to face.

One by one they came, Far as the eye could see. Each life somehow touched By your generosity. Little things that you had done, Sacrifices made. Unnoticed on the earth In heaven, now proclaimed.

And I know up in heaven you're not supposed to cry. But I am almost sure there were tears in your eyes. As Jesus took your hand and you stood before the Lord, He said, 'My child, look around you. Great is your reward.'

Thank you for giving to the Lord. I am a life that was changed. Thank you for giving to the Lord. I am so glad you gave.

(Ray Boltz - Thank You, 1995)