

Study Fifteen

CALLED TO SUFFER

A study on suffering is one which none can look at objectively because it touches the core of every person's life and every part of life. A person's attitude to suffering determines whether they will grow to maturity or shrivel to meaninglessness. Rightly understood, suffering is the path of life, and the avoidance of suffering, man's rebellion against God.

While this study focuses on suffering as a Christian, there are aspects of suffering which all share, and in the sense that a Christian is rightly related to all of life, Christian suffering must include the pain and anguish associated with being a creature, as well as the suffering associated with being a Christian.

SUFFERING AS FALLEN CREATURES IN A FALLEN WORLD

Pain was not a part of the original creation but the result of rebellion. It is a great marvel of grace that it will not be part of the new heaven and earth either (Rev. 21:4). But, for the present, it is an essential ingredient of life. We may best see this by noting some of its facets.

- (a) Shame. Undoubtedly, Adam did not find his shame easy to bear and sought to avoid the confrontation with God that resulted. The wise man says, 'A man's spirit will endure sickness: but a broken spirit who can bear?' (Prov. 18:14). Because guilt touches man at his centre it is a more acute pain than physical pain. This quickly explains why man is so quick to pretend that he has not sinned, or that his sin is not bad (Rom. 1:32; I John 1:8–10). The prophets warned those who were at ease when their consciences should have troubled them (Isa. 32:9–12; Amos 6:1–3). On the other hand, those who accept this suffering and so mourn, are blessed and shall be comforted (Matt. 5:4).
- (b) Sin brought with it, injustice and inhumanity of man to his fellows. This means that all in some way suffer the loss of some rights, or their property or reputation. This has many aspects all of which are fairly well recognised.
- (c) When the earth was cursed and pain added to childbirth, God took the two things he had given man and woman to do, and made them painful. So man cannot fulfil his vocation of subduing and filling the earth without suffering. Therefore those who avoid suffering must avoid the essential business of life, skirt around its issues and responsibilities, and plunge into unreality. Human rights can never include freedom from pain in an ultimate sense. It is clear that no man hates his own flesh and should nurture the flesh of others as he does his own. To avoid pain is natural, but one may not extend this to avoidance of the task with which pain is unavoidably associated (cf. Jer. 48:10, 11). One could illustrate by mentioning tiresome

work, the disciplining of children, pioneering beyond the realms of convention and security, control of physical appetites, meeting the needs of others (II Corin. 8:13), and speaking the truth in love. All of these have to do with living creatively and usefully in the world, as commanded, and all will be the occasion of pain. Jesus showed how a man can attempt to use affluence to insulate himself from further suffering (Luke 12:19). This man opted out of life and was asked to give an account of his stewardship.

- (d) Paul shows how Christians share in a universal suffering of creation which was intentionally subjected to futility and where all things tend to decay (Rom. 8:18–25). This is the pain which the preacher records in Ecclesiastes. (e.g. 5:16), and from which he learned to live before God rather than in earthly life of itself.
- (e) Sickness is a study in itself, but a few comments must suffice. What is said of sickness may apply in many respects also to accidents and tragedies of various kinds. Many sicknesses of course arise from abuse of the body by one-self or others, wrong attitudes, etc. But this does not cover all sickness and does not cover any sickness adequately. Sickness may be a judgement of God (Ps. 107:10–22; I Corin. 11:30), or simply for the glory of God (Job 1; John 11:4). In any case it does reveal the essential purposelessness of life apart from God (Eccl. 5:17).

God's grace at various times grants relief from sickness (Exod. 15:26; 23:25) and rejection of his covenant may result in a sickness of judgement or chastening (Deut. 28:58–61). Healing or health may be a sign of favour (Ps. 103:3; Isa. 33:24), indicating an end to judgement, but this is not the whole picture. Job's family died and he was grievously ill and in a state of despair. No reason is given to Job; but the story reveals what a high price God puts on the fact that Job's worship is not tied to earthly benefit (Job 23:10). Elisha became sick and died (II Kings 13:14) and Daniel became ill for some days when God appalled him with a vision of the future (Dan. 8:27).

When the Messiah came, he healed as a sign of God's favour (Isa. 53:4; Matt. 8:17), and his apostles did the same (Acts 4:10-14). However, we cannot prove that there is universal healing for all the saints (e.g., Phil. 2:26f.; I Tim. 5:23; II Tim 4:20; III John 2). We are certainly not to point the finger at those who are sick, as Job's accusers must later have regretted doing (Job 12:5; 30:11; 42:7–9; Psalm 123:4), but to visit them and encourage them (Isa. 58:10; Matt. 25:43). We share with them in being part of the creation still longing for its final redemption. Where requested, elders should pray for healing (James 5:14–16). A prayer of faith is a prayer that believes in the goodness of God to heal and the willingness of God to heal in a particular case. Jesus said he only did what he saw the Father doing (John 5:19-20). In similar manner, the church needs to know in all of its actions that it is God who is doing the works and that they are participating in those works.

- (f) Hebrews says that apart from the gospel, man is subject to life long bondage because of the fear of death (2:15) and this fear has to do with punishment (I John 4:18). All men share this fear except that in the gospel, God has removed all need for it. So death for lost man must remain the ultimate suffering, not just its fact, but its prospect, and its appropriateness to his sin. When Jesus came, in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin (Rom. 8:3) and partook of the same nature with man, it is inevitable that he be made perfect through suffering and actually die as a sinner would die, to deliver those who were in bondage (Heb. 2:9f., 14f.).

It would be inappropriate to conclude this section on suffering in general without showing that 'God does not willingly afflict or grieve the sons of men' (Lam. 3:33) and is not willing that any should perish (II Peter 3:9). If suffering exists, and God is good, then the presence of suffering must indicate a very high goal that God has in view to render the suffering incidental to the accomplishment of that purpose. It must also indicate that God suffers too. In fact, God is afflicted when his people suffer affliction (Isa. 63:9), and in Christ he suffered the pain of a world in rebellion in order to reconcile it to himself. (II Corin. 5:19). If Paul could say that he was making up what was lacking in the sufferings of Christ (Col. 1:24), then it is true that God suffers until he has united all things in Christ.

THE SUFFERINGS OF CHRIST

Jesus was 'a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief'. Many of these sorrows he would know by being man in a fallen world, and many others by being sympathetically involved in the suffering of fallen men, and later identified with them. He foretold his own suffering (Luke 9:22; 17:25; 22:15) and after the resurrection said; 'Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things . . .' (Luke 24:26). The prophets had made it clear that the Messiah would suffer (I Peter 1:11) and the apostles affirmed the same (Acts 3:18; 17:3). This necessity of suffering reflects not only that this was foretold, but the appropriateness of the sufferings. If he was identified with man he would inevitably suffer (Isa. 53:4), and equally, if he was one with the Father, he would suffer (Isa. 63:9). He would endure all the pain of being a good man in a bad world (outlined more fully in the next section).

There are no sorrows among men like Christ's sorrows (Isa. 53:3f., cf. Lam. 1:12). Because he took all sin into himself and bore all the wrath of God for sin in his body, and because his sensitivity to sin was not sedated by personal guilt, he has suffered totally. And because that is so there need be no sufferings like his ever again, and in fact, never can be any sufferings like his again.

However, it is remarkable that while none can experience the sorrows of the cross, his suffering is the pattern of things into which Christian sufferings fit. That is each must take up his own cross, or the suffering that is consistent with living in and redeeming the world (Matt 10:38; John 16:33; Acts 9:16; Phil. 1:27-30). It is part of Christian ministry, and young Christians are likewise told that they are to come into the kingdom with suffering (Acts 14:22; 1 Thess. 3:4). Paul in fact suffered the loss of all things for Christ and so

entered into the fellowship of his sufferings (Phil 3:8–10), even making up what was lacking in the sufferings of Christ (Col 1:24). That Christian sufferings are a filling out of Christ's suffering (as man's creating is a filling out of God's creating) gives them rich significance. Therefore, according to Jesus' teaching (Matt. 5:10f.), the apostles were glad that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for him (Acts 5:41) and sought that others should be the same (Heb. 13:12; I Peter 4:13).

SUFFERING AS A CHRISTIAN

The term Christian was originally used by unbelievers and was probably a term of contempt (Acts 11:26; I Peter 4:16). Suffering as a Christian is not just a fact of life but a calling with its own distinct purpose and value (I Peter 2:21). This does not mean that suffering as a Christian only happens when we are engaged in Christian ministry. The contexts in I Peter and elsewhere, show that it may arise because of unjust slave owners, and a whole range of human relationships. It is the character of the person rather than the context which identifies sufferings as Christian sufferings. It should be clear that Christians share the fallen creation's sufferings because they are still flesh and blood (Rom. 8:18–25). If this were not so, God would breed a race of 'rice Christians' who loved him for his pain preventative capabilities.

However, there are sufferings which occur specifically to those who are godly, and Paul says all who are godly will share in them (II Tim. 3:12; cf. Heb. 11:37). A man zealous for good deeds would not ordinarily draw harm to himself says Peter (I Peter 3:13), but his whole letter is a recognition that this in fact does happen. We may now summarise this suffering.

- (a) In the beginning, Cain murdered his brother because his offering was rejected and Abel's accepted. Cain must have highly prized God's acceptance, even though he could not have thought highly of God. It was Abel's acceptance by God and the obvious joy this gave him that drove Cain to jealousy, hatred, and murder. One can imagine the effect when Jesus demonstrated the acceptance he had with the Father (e.g., John 3:2; 8:29–33), so the opposition he received is not surprising. In a similar way, Judaisers spied out the liberty which Christians demonstrated at Jerusalem in order to bring them into bondage (Gal. 2:4), and their opposition became one of the chief sources of persecution in the early church. It may be further observed that the Judaisers themselves were avoiding suffering by reducing religion to making a good appearance (Gal. 6:12). To pursue reality in religion (via the cross), meant that Paul had to live under constant fire.
- (b) In various ways, the release of the gospel changes the lifestyle of people causing disruption to the lives of others. For example, the idol makers in Ephesus raised a storm because their livelihood was affected (Acts 19:23–19).

- (c) Suffering arises for Christians as they increasingly see the world as God sees it and love it as Christ loved it (See Rom. 9:1–3; cf., Amos 6:6; Phil. 2:19–30).
- (d) The taking of the gospel to all peoples involves self-denial, inconvenience, lacking of necessities, and unknown risks (For examples see 1 Corin. 9:12; Phil 4:12; Col. 1:24; II Tim. 1:12; 2:8–13).
- (e) Suffering is a necessary ingredient in the unity of the Church as of all social units. Peter says: ‘Have unity of spirit, sympathy, love of the brethren, a tender heart and a humble mind. Do not return evil for evil or reviling for reviling; but on the contrary bless, for to this you have been called.’ (I Peter 3:8f.) None of these things can be accomplished unless at least one party in the relationship is willing to endure suffering. In the same context, Peter shows that slaves should be willing to endure pain while suffering unjustly (I Peter 2:18–21), and that all should be subject to every human institution even though human beings speak against the believers as wrong doers. (I Peter 2:12f.).
- (f) All who suffer cry out ‘How long . . .’ (Rev 6:10), and ‘Come, Lord Jesus!’ (Rev. 22:20). They long, not just for relief from pain, but for the revelation of all God’s gracious purpose. They long for the kingdom of God to come and can no longer be at ease in this world (Heb. 11:13–16). Their suffering necessarily is, that they must wait (Rev. 6:9–11).
- (g) Satan goes about seeking to devour (I Peter 5:8). He is the thief who comes to steal and kill and destroy (John 10:10). It is he and his cohorts that Christians must fight (Eph. 6:10–18). Daniel mourned for three weeks over a vision that God gave him and the angel sent to encourage him was delayed that same time by the (demonic) prince of Persia (Dan. 10:13). The book of Revelation shows that it is Satan who marshals all forms of suffering against God’s people (e.g. Rev 13:1–10). It is because the battle in which Christians are involved, is being fought on so much wider a front than they can see, that they will frequently not understand the sufferings through which they pass. (e.g. Job).

VALUE OF SUFFERING

In addition to knowing that suffering is inevitable and necessary in the world, the Christian will recognise the values that it has.

- (a) A Christian’s confession of Christ as Lord, must be able to withstand tribulation or is shown to be spurious. (Matt. 13:21; 24:9–14; I Thess. 3:2–5; II Thess. 1:4). The world is rightly sceptical of anything that cannot face appropriate testing. Tribulation is the means of that testing.
- (b) Paul says: ‘. . . we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope . . .’ (Rom. 5:3f.). Suffering is so much a part of the producing of character that even the Son of God was ‘made perfect’, and ‘learned obedience’ through what he suffered (Heb. 2:10; 5:8). The

development of Christ's character does not imply that he needed punishment in order to learn, but that each suffering required more maturity to face; so by obeying his Father, finally in the face of death, he grew to full maturity. Job seems to have this in mind when he says: 'When he has tried me, I shall come forth as gold' (Job 23:10). Peter boldly says that 'whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin' (I Peter 4:1f.). His meaning seems to be that once a person (such as Christ, or ourselves) has suffered for a principle, he is not likely to succumb to lesser provocations, having become settled in their conviction by the experience of suffering.

- (c) All fallen creatures must be chastened by their parents—and God performs this function for his own children. This is not pleasant but painful, but afterwards 'yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness (Heb. 12:3–11). It is God's anger, but restrained, so that we may not be rejected but refined (Isaiah 48:9–11). Such suffering may appear as a direct act of God, or the discipline of the Church, or the hostility of sinners, or the natural results of our own actions, but will always be subject to the purpose and control of God, and therefore useful (Psalm 119:67, 71, 75).

It often happens that when a person suffers for their own wrong, they are chastened by a power, or person who goes beyond what they were given to do (Job 30:11; Jer. 46:28; Zech. 1:15). Peter was aware that the church was being judged and persecuted at the same time (I Peter 4:17). Habakkuk became perplexed when sinful Judah was chastened by a more sinful adversary. But when God explained his action with Judah and Chaldea, he could accept the chastisement without becoming pre-occupied with the injustices by which it occurred. (Hab. 3:17–19).

- (d) The greatest value of suffering must be that we are thereby introduced into a more understanding relationship with God himself. Hosea could only understand the anguish of God for Israel, when his own wife proved unfaithful. It is by suffering that we understand and become like Christ (I Peter 2:19–21) and have God's approval. Such persons are blessed because the spirit of glory and of God rests on them (I Peter 4:12–14; cf. Ps. 132:10).

RESPONSE TO SUFFERING

Because suffering is grievous, very clear directions are given to shepherd the sufferer through his darkness. There are things a Christian ought not do.

- (a) The sufferer should not be ashamed or feel shame for those who are suffering (II Tim 1:8; I Peter 4:12–19). Instinctively, we are inclined to attach blame to suffering as did the Jews (John 9:1–4), but the Christian must affirm his justification (Rom. 8:31–39). Even if the suffering is a chastisement, there is dignity in that (Heb. 12:5–11) and certainly no condemnation. (Rom. 8:1).
- (b) The sufferer ought not to become depressed or 'lose heart' (Eph 3:13). However it is fair to notice that as great a man as Job said to God: 'I know that thou wilt bring me to death' (Job 30:23). Very few people rise to

understand their suffering while they are suffering. Even if feelings are low, there is no reason to lose faith. The Psalmist said that he 'kept faith' even when he saw that all men were a vain hope (Ps. 116:10f.; cf. Heb. 10:32–36). This will be more possible if the sufferer calls to God in his distress and is given such understanding as is appropriate at the time. Suffering is made worse than it need be by confusion. Hence the wrongness of what was said by Job's comforters.

- (c) The sufferer has no need to fear because Christ has overcome the world (John 16:33; Phil. 1:27–30; Rev. 2:10).
- (d) The sufferer must not give way to anger or reviling (I Peter 2:23; Job 36:18), but rather bless those who persecute him. In this way he will not be shamed for his own behaviour, and those who wrong him will stand exposed alone (I Peter 2:15; 3:16; 4:12–19; e.g. I Thess. 2:1–8). In any case the war he is fighting is not against flesh and blood (Eph. 6:10f.) so nothing would be gained by a victory.

Positively the Christian can respond to suffering in a number of ways:

- (a) He can determine to take his share of suffering in the power of God (II Tim. 1:8).
- (b) He can pray (James 5:13) and commit his cause to God (Psalm 35; 37; 88; 90) who is a faithful Creator (I Peter 4:19).
- (c) He can call to mind the kindness of the Lord and have hope (Lam. 3:21ff.); he can be comforted because the Lord's promise gives life (Psalm 119:50; 92). David called God the one who delivered him from all adversity (II Sam. 4:9; Psalm 34:19).
- (d) He can give an account of his faith with gentleness and patience (Rom. 12:12; I Peter 3:15) because he understands the reason for delay of justice—the Lord himself is compassionate and merciful with his persecutors (James 5:10f.).
- (e) He can rise even to joy in the midst of pain (I Peter 4:13) in the same sense that Jesus endured the cross for the joy that was set before him (Heb. 12:2). The Macedonian churches experienced not only joy, but generosity in the midst of their difficulty (II Corin. 8:2). In fact, joy is very necessary to facing suffering because joy provides strength (Neh. 8:10), but a broken spirit cannot be endured (Prov. 15:15).
- (f) He can draw strength from the fact that he shares with many others, the sufferings of Christ (I Corin. 12:26; II Corin. 1:6; Heb 12:1–2; I Peter 5:9f.). Even Jesus saw his sufferings as part of a stream of suffering that started with Abel (Matt. 23:29–36). This solidarity is to be expressed by weeping with those who weep (Rom. 12:15). As far as it is able, the church should not allow its suffering members to suffer alone.

THE GOAL OF SUFFERING

The goal of suffering is always the glory that is to be revealed. Moses thought it better to suffer with the people of God than to enjoy the temporary pleasures of Egypt (Heb. 11:25). By comparison with the glory to be revealed, all present suffering may be seen as a 'slight momentary affliction' (II Corin. 4:17).

Christ himself is crowned with glory and honour because of his sufferings (Heb. 2:9; cf. Rev. 5:12), and in like manner, if Christians suffer with him, they will be glorified with him (Rom. 8:17). This is not meant to indicate that Christ and his followers must morbidly earn the right to glory by their suffering; that would be to reduce it to the level of a painful tribal initiation ceremony. Suffering has no inherent value in itself or one could mature oneself by self inflicted wounds. Pain is simply an inevitable result of staying in contact with life as it is, and those who pursue reality and love find this is so. Christ refused Satan's enticements to move into a world of illusions, and Christians must do the same. But the true goal of all things is glory and those who continue in what is real, will share in that glory.