Mystery of Suffering: Why Tears and Sorrows Come to God's People

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THE MYSTERY OF SUFFERING

WHY TEARS AND SORROWS COME TO GOD'S PEOPLE

A Radio Message
Given Over
Station KMPC
Beverly Hills, California

By
LOUIS T. TALBOT
Pastor, Church of the Open Door
Los Angeles, California
The Mystery of Suffering

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Why Do God’s Children Suffer?

The question we are asking today is not a new one; it has been the cry of the human heart throughout the centuries: Why does God permit His children to suffer? Why the tears and heartaches? Why the sorrow and pain? Since He is able to do all things, why does He not spare His children these trials? We can understand why the wicked reap what they sow; for sin leaves its impress, and brings forth a harvest of grief and sorrow. But we are not considering here the suffering of the unconverted. We are not even dealing with the sorrows of the Christian who is living out of the will of God. We are thinking only of the godly man or woman who is seeking to do His will and to bring glory to Him. Why does He permit so faithful a follower to suffer?
It may be that many "listening in" to this radio message this morning have long been on beds of pain. It may be that some are going through deep shadows. You do not question God's power to remove the trial. You do not question His love in permitting it. But why? Why does He not remove it?

Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was "a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost" (Acts 6:5). There was no question as to His relationship to God. He "did great wonders and miracles among the people" (Acts 6:8). And when he was falsely accused because of his witness to the Lord Jesus, "all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel" (Acts 6:15). Yet the angry mob hurled stones at him, and he became the first martyr of Jesus. Why did God permit it? Surely the world needed the ministry of such a man as Stephen!

When the Lord told Ananias to go to Saul of Tarsus and minister unto him, He said: "He is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel: for I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake" (Acts 9:15, 16). Read the book of Acts to see what Paul suffered. Read his own summary of trials endured for Christ's sake, as recorded in II Cor. 11:23-33.

Read of the sufferings of the heroes and heroines of faith as found in Heb. 11:32-38. Read the history of the early church, and you will find that the Christians of the first three centuries suffered unspeakable torture at the hand of pagan emperors. They were thrown into the arena to be devoured by wild beasts. They were dragged naked through the streets. They were subjected to gross indignities and horrible physical torture. Why? Why did God permit these early Christians to become martyrs of the Cross.

It is said of Charles Haddon Spurgeon, that great winner of souls, that toward the close of his ministry he never knew a day without physical pain. On the pulpit of his church in London there was a couch, where he lay during the preliminary services, praying for strength and power from on high to preach the Gospel. Then having given out the message, back to the couch he went. Why did God permit His useful servant to suffer physical pain?

This is the question we want to answer from the pages of Holy Writ. And in the answer lies a veritable gold mine of spiritual knowledge and comfort for the people of God.

Two False Arguments

BEFORE we consider why God allows His children to suffer, let us look briefly at two false arguments often presented in answer to this question. Some say, as did Job's "miserable comforters," that suffering is the result of sin in the life, or that it is the result of
lack of faith. Let us consider these two arguments separately.

Of course, we know that all tears and sorrows came into the world as the result of sin. In Adam the human race inherited "the wages of sin"—death, with all that this involves. But those who say that the child of God who seeks to do His will suffers because of definite acts of sin and disobedience—those who argue along this line pervert the Scriptures and bring grief to the stricken heart. Stephen and Paul and the Christian martyrs were heroes and heroines of faith. Their lives were above reproach because they were redeemed by the blood of Christ and were utterly consecrated to His service and will. Their sufferings were for a testimony before a godless, Christ-rejecting world. And who would dare say that unconfessed sin in these godly lives brought them physical suffering and death?

The Lord Jesus answered this false argument finally and completely in connection with the healing of the man born blind. His disciples had asked Him, saying, "Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?" Then "Jesus answered, Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him" (John 9:2, 3). In order that the Lord from heaven might perform a great miracle, this man had spent years in blindness. His suffering was for the glory of God!

No, my Christian friend; do not let any man trouble you with this false, unjust, unkind argument. Many dear saints have endured long years of pain and sor-
row—for the glory of God, that the miracle of His grace might be made manifest before an unbelieving world.

The second of these is like unto the first. Those who hold it say that if only the suffering saint had more faith, he could be cured of his illness—that sorrow comes from lack of faith. Again, we call to witness such stalwart heroes of the faith as Stephen and Paul. Could any human being have more faith than they had? But there are at least three other New Testament Christians whom we would consider as examples of faith, yet who were sick and in physical need.

1. Epaphroditus. Paul was a prisoner in Rome, and the Church at Philippi had sent him a gift by one of their members, Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25; 4:18). While in Rome on this errand of mercy, Epaphroditus "was sick nigh unto death" (Phil. 2:26-30). Why? Because of lack of faith on his part? The Word of God says plainly: "For the work of Christ he was nigh unto death, not regarding his life" (Phil. 2:30). And at the hand of this man of faith Paul sent his priceless letter to the Philippian Church. "For the work of Christ" Epaphroditus was sick; "but God had mercy on him" and raised him up in answer to prayer. To say that he was sick because of lack of faith, is to contradict the Word of God.

2. Trophimus. Again the Apostle Paul wrote of another of his fellow-laborers, saying, "Trophimus have I left at Miletum sick" (II Tim. 4:20). Here was a faithful servant whom God did not see fit to heal.
3. Timothy. To his "son in the faith" Paul wrote, saying, "Use a little wine for thy stomach's sake and thine often infirmities" (I Tim. 5:23). The great apostle did not prescribe more faith, but a medicinal treatment for Timothy's "often infirmities."

Bear in mind, my friend, that I am not saying God does not hear the prayer of faith on behalf of the sick. I believe He does often raise up the sick in answer to prayer, but according to His own, perfect will, and often by the means of medical science. Sometimes, however, it is not in His all-wise plan to relieve the suffering saint; and to say that those who are not healed lack faith to be healed is both contrary to the teaching of the Scriptures and unfair to the sufferer. It makes the one being tested and tried wonder if, after all, he has faith enough for salvation, if indeed, he lacks the faith necessary to physical healing. In other words, if God has provided for physical healing in the atonement, as many claim, then if a person prays for physical healing and his prayer is not answered by restoration to health, he begins to doubt whether or not his prayer for salvation from sin has been heard. Do you not see where this line of reasoning leads?

Not long since I received a letter from a groping soul, whose loved one had gone through such a bitter experience. And the result had been a nervous, miserable state of mind and body, doubt filling the whole being concerning the welfare of the soul. I am glad the Word of God is not as cruel as is the shallow student of that eternal Word who says that suffering is the result of lack of faith.

The fallacy of these two arguments is seen in the very fact that hundreds and thousands of God's dear saints have died—because of disease. Moreover, His own signal blessing upon the service of Christian doctors and nurses who have gone into all the world with the Gospel speaks for itself. The medical missionary tells us that over and over again the successful treatment of physical pain has given him entrance into the heart of the pagan, and has opened the way for the soul-saving message of The Great Physician.

No, my dear Christian sufferer, God is giving you an opportunity to bear testimony to Him, for His glory, as we shall see in our further examination of the Scriptures. He has committed unto you a special trust. Let us see this from His own infallible Word.

Trouble is a Trust

CHRISTIAN doctors and nurses are entrusted with a gift to use for the glory of God. All education is a trust, and we must answer to the Lord for it. Money is a trust; a beautiful voice, the gift of teaching, the care of children in the home and in the school—all these are trusts from the Giver of "every good and perfect gift" (James 1:17). And in this sense trouble
is a trust to the child of God. We must face it and use it for the glory of His name.

God can not trust some of His people with money; neither can He trust all of us with sorrow and suffering. He knows that we should not use it for His glory.

Job is a good example of one whom God could permit to suffer. And his griefs were not the result of sin in his life! Neither were they the result of lack of faith! God bore testimony to the faithfulness and devotion of His servant.

Turn to the Bible record, and read the story of how Satan accused Job to God and how God permitted Satan to try Job, “for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience” (James 5:10, 11). Remember, as you read, that Job knew nothing about this conversation between God and Satan. He did not know, as we know now, that he was to be an object-lesson in patience and faith for many generations to come. Had he known why he was called to suffer, it would have been easier for him to endure; but then his victory would not have been so triumphant. Perhaps God is using you, my Christian brother, in the same way, as an object-lesson in patience before your family and friends.

With his children gone, his property gone, his body a loathsome thing, yet “in all this did not Job sin with his lips,” when even his wife bade him “curse God, and die” (Job 2:9, 10). “The Lord gave,” he said; “and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21).

“Now when Job’s three friends heard of all this evil that was come upon him, they came every one from his own place.” So astonished were they at the change that had taken place in him that they “sat down with him upon the ground seven days and seven nights, and none spake a word unto him: for they saw that his grief was very great.” (See Job 2:11-13.) They just sat and looked at him in his miserable condition. Think of it! Seven days and seven nights!

Then they began to upbraid and accuse him, and say that all this calamity had come upon him because he was a hypocrite and had sinned. No wonder Job answered them, saying, “Miserable comforters are ye all” (Job 16:2). No wonder he called them “forgers of lies” and “physicians of no value” (Job 13:4).

Some of the most sublime of all the words of Scripture fell from the lips of Job during his sore affliction. “Though he slay me, yet will I trust him,” Job said of Jehovah (Job 13:15). “I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: and though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another; though my reins be consumed within me” (Job 19:25-27). These and other utterances of this man of God bear witness to his fidelity to his Redeemer, even though he did not understand why he was called to suffer so.
And Satan's mouth was closed, for Job glorified God. Can that be said of you—of me? How do we behave when trouble comes? Satan is "the accuser of our brethren . . . before our God day and night" (Rev. 12:10). Let us not give him a chance to say that our God is not able to sustain in any trial.

Turn now to the closing chapter of the book of Job, and see how God blessed him "when he prayed for his friends: also the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before" (Job 42:10)—sons and daughters, flocks and herds, and many years of joy. Likewise, as we endure trials for Christ's sake, we have His strength and presence and joy now, and for all eternity everlasting life and His glory to behold, and to share.

Trouble rightly used is a trust. To the child of God who seeks His will, whatever the cost, it is one way of honoring Him. It is easy to be a happy Christian in the time of prosperity and health and earthly joys. But our neighbors can tell what our relationship to God is when trouble comes in like a flood.

There lives in Australia a Miss Higgins who knows what it means to suffer for Christ's sake. Years ago she was afflicted with a disease that necessitated the amputation of one arm, then the other, then both legs. Nothing daunted, she had a little pad made for her shoulder and learned to write by the movement of her body. For twenty-five years she has spent her days writing letters to those in sorrow, bearing witness to the love and faithfulness of God. When Dr. Torrey and Dr. Chapman were preaching in Australia, they went to see her. And as they came away, Dr. Chapman testified that he had never known before just what the grace of God could do.

And this brings us to the next reason why a loving Father permits His children to suffer.

The Suffering Saint Proves the Sufficiency of God's Grace

Here is a verse, Isaiah 50:10, which is like balm to the troubled soul: "Who is among you that feareth the Lord, that obeyeth the voice of his servant, that walketh in darkness, and hath no light? let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God."

Isaiah, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, was addressing those of God's people, Israel, who feared the Lord; that is, they put in Him a reverential trust. They obeyed the voice of His servants, the prophets. Yet they were walking in darkness, without light to understand the meaning of their trials and suffering. And to such he said, "Let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God."

Is that your experience, my brother? Have you lost your wealth? Are you suffering from a weak body? Have your family and friends forsaken you? Have you "no light" as to why these things are so? Then trust in the Lord, and stay upon your God!
Let me tell you how that text became precious to me. I had two Christian friends in Indianapolis, a man and his wife who were serving the Lord in the Union Rescue Mission of that city. My friend had been a very profane man, employed by a railroad company before his conversion. But he was wonderfully saved; and possessing real gifts of leadership, he was put in charge of this evangelical center. The Mission was conducted in a vacated théâtre building, which seated about three thousand people. My friend soon became a leader among all the evangelical forces of that city.

Then one Lord’s Day after the morning service, I had just sat down to dinner when a long-distance call told me that after the Saturday evening meeting at the Mission on the previous day my two friends had gone for a ride. Weary from the day’s work, they had gone out for a little relaxation. Their car was struck by an interurban express train, and both of them were instantly killed.

They themselves went into the presence of the Lord they loved, which was “far better” than any earthly experience; but they left behind them a stricken family who wondered why God had permitted such a tragic death, especially when His servants were being so greatly used for His glory.

I was asked to have a part in the funeral service. A son of the man and a sister of his wife met me at the station. They took me to the scene of the accident, and the sister said: “I’ve been a Christian for twenty years. I have trusted through light and shadow. But for the first time in my life I am in dense darkness. Can you give me a text of Scripture that will meet my need?” And immediately the Holy Spirit flashed into my mind Isaiah 50:10. I read it, line by line, asking her if it fit her case. She said it did. And it fits the case of every groping, troubled soul who would prove the sufficiency of God’s grace.

In the time of storm, my friend, you need an anchor outside your own life and mind, even as the anchor is cast outside the ship at sea. You must be anchored in a Person, the Lord Jesus Christ who died and rose again for you, who loves you with an everlasting love.

Paul knew what it was to prove the sufficiency of God’s grace. To him was given “a thorn in the flesh”—to quote the great apostle, “the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure” (II Cor. 12:7). To him God had given a special revelation. He had been caught up to the third heaven, instructed of God in the great doctrines he was to give to the church. (See II Cor. 12:1-4; compare Rom. 16:25, 26; Gal. 1:11-17; Eph. 3:1-11.) To keep him humble, in the face of these marvelous privileges, God allowed him to suffer “a thorn in the flesh.” Bible students generally agree that it was a very poor eyesight, for often Paul had to dictate his letters to another. Whatever it was, it was “in the flesh.” It was physical. Concerning it, he writes further, saying: “For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace
is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness." These wonderful words have comforted thousands of sorrowing hearts since Paul's day. Can you and I say with Paul in reply, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me"? (See II Cor. 12:8, 9.)

Many Christians today are familiar with the life-story of Annie Johnson Flint, who a few years ago went to be with Christ. An orphan at the age of six, she and her sister were adopted by a man and his wife in Vermont. Gifted with a talent for music, Annie Johnson Flint, had hopes for a brilliant career in this art. But at an early age arthritis fastened its grip on her body; and by the time she was twenty-five, she was a real sufferer. Many years she lived, through her pain, to witness to the Lord she loved, spending her days in an invalid's chair or confined to a bed of pain. Yet she accepted her suffering as a trust from God, and proved the sufficiency of His grace. Among her many beautiful poems which exalt the Lord Jesus and render praise to Him and His ways with His redeemed children, there is one that aptly expresses the thought we are dwelling upon here. It is based on the words found in James 4:6.

"He Giveth More Grace"

"He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater; He sendeth more strength when the labors increase; To added affliction He addeth His mercy; To multiplied trials He multiplies peace. When we have exhausted our store of endurance, When our strength has failed ere the day is half done, When we reach the end of our hoarded resources, Our Father's full giving is only begun. His love has no limit; His grace has no measure; His power no boundary known unto men: For out of His infinite riches in Jesus, He giveth and giveth and giveth again."

"Tribulation Worketh Patience"

There is another reason why God permits His children to endure trials and affliction. He knows the value of experience in developing stalwart Christian character and in bringing out the fullest expression of the Christian graces. Of many passages from His Word along this line, two are almost identical: one from the pen of Paul; the other, from James. Let us read these two Scripture portions carefully:

"We glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope; and hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us" (Rom. 5:3-5).

"My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations (or 'trials'); knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and..."
entire (or 'mature and complete' in the Christian experience), wanting nothing" (James 1:2-4).

It is not an easy thing to "glory" or rejoice in tribulations, to "count it all joy" when manifold trials come. Only the grace of God can teach us to receive trouble with joy, knowing that so received it makes us more like our risen Lord, and enables us to glorify Him. It is only by the power of the Holy Spirit in the heart that we can receive trouble so.

Another text bearing upon this same truth is found in Proverbs 3:12 and quoted in Hebrews 12:6. "Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth." The thought here implied in "chastening" is not that of punishment, but rather of "child-training." Let us read it like this: "Whom the Lord loveth he child-trains." What a world of comfort we find in the thought! A kind Father in heaven, knowing how impatient and impetuous we are, wants us to become kind and patient and gracious. And one way of accomplishing this for us and in us is by permitting the fires of testing to burn up the dross. This is what Job meant when he said, "He knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold" (Job 23:10).

Have you ever wondered at the placid, calm, untroubled spirit of some mature Christian, perhaps some elderly saint, who has gone through great sorrow? Have you ever marvelled at the child-like faith of such a Christian? His or her presence is a benediction to young and old. Such an one has learned through long experience that "tribulation worketh patience." He has learned to rejoice in trials, since trials so received make him more conscious of God's grace, more like Him who suffered and died to redeem him from sin. Such a Christian can be used of God in service for His name's sake. And this thought brings us to the last line of Scripture which we are to consider today.

Suffering Prepares the Christian for Service

TROUBLE rightly used fits us for service now and in the life to come. First let us see how we can, in this present life, serve God better because of trials joyfully received.

Paul wrote to the Corinthian Christians, saying: "Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God" (II Cor. 1:3, 4). Have you wondered why God let sorrow come into your life, my Christian friend? He wants you to experience His own comfort, then in turn comfort others with the comfort wherewith you yourself have been comforted of God.

I remember well how, some years ago, I went to the home of a young mother who had just lost her little
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baby. She was not a Christian, and did not know the comfort of God in her great sorrow. I tried to point her to the Saviour, but she was not open to receive the message. She doubted even the love of God in taking her little one from her. As I talked with her, she turned to me and said: "Mr. Talbot, you don't know anything about a case like mine. You have never lost a baby of your own." And I had not. She seemed to think that settled the question, and she was not persuaded to let the God of all comfort enter her heart.

Just then the door opened, and another mother came in, a Christian mother, who had also seen her own baby "depart . . . to be with Christ." At once she began to comfort the stricken parent "with the comfort wherewith" she herself had been " comforted of God." And this ministry on the part of one who had been prepared for service through her own sorrow led a groping soul into a personal knowledge of the Saviour who loves, even "unto the uttermost."

Then again, our trials here on earth are a preparation for service in the millennial reign of Christ. Listen to such words as these:

"The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18).

"Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal" (II Cor. 4:17, 18).

"If we suffer, we shall also reign with him" (II Tim. 2:12).

"Blessed is the man that endureth temptation (or 'trials'): for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him" (James 1:12).

"Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life" (Rev. 2:10).

"And I (John) saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years" (Rev. 20:4).

My dear suffering saint, "weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning" (Psalm 30:5). "They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him" (Psalm 126:5, 6). "God shall wipe away all tears . . . there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain" (Rev. 21:4).

Since trials prepare us for greater service now and in the glory, since heaven and rest and the presence
of the Lord will be all the richer because of His "child-training" here on earth, let us, like the apostles of old, rejoice that we are "counted worthy to suffer" for His sake who was the Man of Sorrows—for us!

"Who is among you that feareth the Lord, that obeyeth the voice of his servant, that walketh in darkness, and hath no light? let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God."

The "God of all comfort" "giveth songs in the night" (II Cor. 1:3; Job 35:10).