

THE SAINTS ARE HURTING

An evangelical pastor was taking phone calls on a radio talk-show. One caller wept as she told of her need for guidance in dealing with her many burdens.

With genuine compassion in his voice the pastor said, “My dear, just remember that whatever you are going through right now the Lord loves you.” The pastor could not have said truer words—but that was all he told her.

The Bible provides satisfactory explanations and guidance for our suffering.

Reasons Why Christians Suffer

Some suffering is the result of sin. It is obvious to all that an alcoholic is destroying his or her body.

Yet, someone has well said, “All sin causes suffering, but all suffering is not caused by sin.”

Consider Paul’s statement in 2 Corinthians 1:3-5:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 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.

The Book of Hebrews teaches that Jesus is our merciful high priest because He came to this earth and suffered as we do. This passage teaches that as we find comfort from God in our sufferings God is equipping us to bring comfort to others.

In verse six Paul adds:

... if we are afflicted, it is for your consolation ...

In verses eight and nine of this same 2 Corinthians passage Paul writes:

For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia: that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life. Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead ...

This is one of the greatest revelations of the entire Bible. The passage indicates that it is not possible for us to trust ourselves and God at the same time.

The passage also implies that our basic tendency in life is to trust ourselves.

Think of this: when is it easiest to ask God for help? Obviously, the answer is *when we know we cannot handle a particular situation ourselves.*

If we go through life trusting only in ourselves, our lives will accomplish only what human wisdom and strength can do. And that would be a tragedy.

Through suffering, God frees us from trusting in ourselves. We then place our faith in Him and move into the vast world of the power and love of God.

In 2 Corinthians 12:7-9a Paul again presents the truth that a believer's suffering results in faith in God.

And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."

Whatever the thorn was, it resulted in suffering on Paul's part.

And God was not going to remove it. The reason: it resulted in grace.

Remember the words: “By grace you are saved through faith?” Second Corinthians 12:7-9 clearly shows that God’s grace is for believers as well as for the non-believers. And because grace comes through faith, the thorn-in-the-flesh passage is about suffering resulting in faith in God.

After the Lord explained to Paul He would not take away the thorn, Paul concluded:

Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 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. 2 Corinthians 12:9b-10

In light of the revelations from the pen of Paul that suffering results in trust in God and not in ourselves, consider another statement from Paul. While in prison in Rome and facing death, he writes the following to the Philippians:

For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labor; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you. And being confident of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy of faith ... Philippians 1:21-25

If you were a pastor leading a church to Christian maturity, where would your emphasis be?

Would your emphasis be on love? Would it be on giving? Would it be on Christian service? Think of all the reasons Paul might have had for returning to Philippi. Then give attention to the one reason he gives. It was for the “*progress and joy of [their] faith.*”

The bottom line of Christian living is faith in God. It is trusting God alone to show us what to do next and trusting Him to make it happen in us and through us.

And God is faithful to send the desperate circumstances to free us from faith in ourselves that we might trust Him.

Dealing with Our Suffering Circumstances

Once we know there is the reason for our suffering, what are we to do next?

First, we can and should do what Paul did. Three times he asked God to remove his thorn-in-the-flesh. There are times God wants to grow our faith through miraculously taking away our suffering circumstances. Go ahead and ask Him to take away the circumstances.

In those cases where God does not take away the suffering circumstances, respond to Paul's command in 1 Thessalonians 5:18.

... in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

The verse does not mean "in spite of everything give thanks." It means "for everything give thanks.

In Ephesians 5:18 the Apostle Paul commands that we be filled with the Holy Spirit. He then lists several things that result from our being filled with the Spirit. In verse 20 he writes we will be:

... giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ ...

Good things happen when Christians thank God for their suffering.

At times, God changes the circumstances.

At other times, He gives a great peace in spite of the suffering.

Consider Philippians 4:6-7:

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by

prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

We are to take our burdens to the Lord in prayer—*with thanksgiving*. Paul does not say the prayers will be answered, but He does say that the peace of God will guard your mind and heart like an army protecting a city.

There is much more in God's word about suffering. But what is mentioned here has led many to glorious victory in Christian living.

FOR MORE MATERIAL

discussing victory in Christian living

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