

SUFFERING FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS*

Every trial we face as followers of Christ is about one thing – it is a test of whether we really believe that God loves us and that His plans for us are good. Every time things happen in our lives which could cause us to doubt God's love for us in Christ, it is a new opportunity to believe afresh that Jesus truly is who He says He is, that His sacrifice was sufficient for all that we face, and that He will faithfully fulfill everything that He has promised. Undoubtedly, all of us will endure all sorts of suffering in our lives. However, when we hear the heart of God asking us through these trials and the pain *Do you believe that I am good?, Do you believe that I love you?, Do you believe that I am enough?, Do you believe what I have promised you?, and Do you believe that I have finished it?*, let us keep our eyes on Jesus and our minds on heaven and resoundingly answer back to Him, Yes!

We serve a King who came willingly to lay down His life as a sacrifice to God so that we could be with Him for eternity. Now, He tells us to go and do likewise by offering ourselves to God unreservedly.

*Romans 12:1: Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, **to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice**, holy and pleasing to God--**this is your true and proper worship**. (Consider also 2Timothy 2:10.)*

This said, I am not writing this to encourage anybody to recklessly throw themselves in the face of danger, and I certainly do not want to inspire any martyr complexes. Rather, it is important for all of us as Christ followers to be prepared and strengthened to follow Him to the fullest, no matter the cost.

DIFFERENT PURPOSE

Before we go even one step further, let us clarify one major difference between Jesus' suffering and ours.

Jesus is the only One appointed by God who could ever suffer and die for our sins and accomplish God's plan of salvation. You and I cannot suffer and die to pay for the sins of ourselves or others and our wounds, blood, or death have no sacrificial atoning value. God appointed Jesus exclusively for this task, and He completed it. He knew the will of God from the foundation of the earth.

*Hebrews 10:14: For **by one sacrifice** he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. (Consider also Hebrews 9:27-28.)*

*Revelation 13:8: All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast--all whose names have not been written in the Lamb's book of life, **the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world**.*

Moreover, our commission is slightly different than Christ's. Jesus came the first time to provide the way of salvation through faith in Him. Now, as His followers, He sends us out to tell everyone about God's salvation through Jesus Christ. Even though our task is slightly different than His, our purpose is similar enough to His that we can expect to face the same type of opposition He faced. Fortunately, the way He endured through trials gave us an example of righteousness and love in the face of the most horrific antagonism.

*John 15:18-21: If the world hates you, **keep in mind that it hated me first**. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember what I told you: **'A servant is not greater than his master.'** If they persecuted me, **they will persecute you also**. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. **They will treat you this way because of my name**, for they do not know the one who sent me.*

1Peter 4:1: Therefore, **since Christ suffered** in his body, **arm yourselves also with the same attitude**, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin.

1Peter 2:21: To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, **leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.**

Ok, now that we've clarified this, we can keep going.

SUFFERING FOR DOING RIGHT

Jesus was without sin, He always spoke the truth, and His life was a demonstration of perfect love. Therefore, He was not crucified for being a bad person, for deceit or trickery, or because He deserved it. He came to carry out God's fore-ordained purpose for Him, and He laid down His life in perfect submission to God and without rebellion against the God-appointed religious leaders or the governing powers in the world. Accordingly, He did not suffer for doing wrong but for doing right.

In contrast, we will be far more likely to do wrong things than Jesus. When we do wrong, we may suffer the consequences of our own wrong choices. However, suffering for doing wrong, making bad choices, or rebelling against authority is not the same as suffering for doing right.

*Galatians 6:7-8: Do not be deceived: **God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.***

*1Peter 2:19-20: For it is commendable if someone bears up under **the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God.** But how is it to your credit if you **receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it?** But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, **this is commendable before God.** (Also, 1Peter 3:17.)*

*1Peter 4:15, 19: **If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler.** ... So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and **continue to do good***

Furthermore, unless the governing authorities demand that we renounce our faith in Christ in order to submit to them or to their laws, we cannot use our faith as an excuse for breaking the law. For example, even though He is the King who appoints all kings and the Son of the God who dwelt in the Temple, Jesus paid taxes to Caesar and He paid the Temple tax. (See Matthew 22:21, 17:24-27; Mark 12:17; Luke 20:25.) Jesus did not have to do these things but He did them willingly in order to not offend the governing authorities or incite any form of doctrinal rebellion. He did not come to start a political or religious insurgence but to usher in the Kingdom of God. The same is true for us.

*Romans 13:1: Let everyone **be subject to the governing authorities**, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The **authorities that exist have been established by God.***

*1Peter 2:13-14: **Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority:** whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.*

Moreover, Jesus' suffering was not due to following some perverse religious teaching or subjecting Himself to pain in order to win God's favor. Jesus suffered out of selfless love for God and for us.

All of this is to say that, when we encounter various forms of suffering in our lives, not all suffering is suffering for righteousness. If we are truly sharing in Christ's sufferings, it will be due to our obedience to God. This said, as we offer ourselves to God for His Kingdom and purposes, He will inevitably lead us into sharing in the sufferings of Jesus, which is suffering for righteousness.

*1Peter 4:13: But rejoice inasmuch as you **participate in the sufferings of Christ**, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.*

CHRIST'S EXAMPLE FOR US IN TRIALS

Jesus responded righteously to every trial He faced. He did so because He lived by the abiding direction of the Holy Spirit which always led Him in the will of God. Now that the Holy Spirit dwells in us, He guides us through our trials so we can learn to respond like Jesus. Here, in chronological order, are some examples of the trials Jesus faced and how He victoriously endured through them with God as our example.

Murder at Birth: From the time Jesus was born, the governing authorities of this world and God's people wanted Him dead. (See Matthew 2.) When they heard that a King was born in Israel, they sought to exterminate Him so they could retain control and power for themselves. God warned Jesus' parents in a dream and they escaped to Egypt for a time.

For us, as we are "birthed" into faith in Jesus and/or begin to follow Him in greater ways, we will often face natural or spiritual attacks. At the outset of our newfound faith or at the commencement of new "seasons" in our life and with Him, it can seem like the forces of this world conspire against what God has commissioned us to do. There may be times when God leads us to flee from things which can hinder or destroy God's work in our lives or to remain hidden for a time for our own protection.

Submission & Waiting for God's Timing: At age twelve, Jesus was ready to begin ministry. He had perfect character because God's nature was in Him and He already had wisdom which confounded the religious authorities. (See Luke 2:41-52.) However, it was not yet time for Jesus to begin His ministry and instead, He went home with His parents and submitted Himself to them. For the next eighteen years, Jesus waited patiently for the time God ordained for Him to begin His ministry without rebellion against the religious authorities or their teachings.

For us, there will be times when we have to wait for God and His timing. Things He has spoken to our hearts are not for us to fulfill in our own strength or strategies and we have to learn to wait upon the Lord for His promises to us to be fulfilled in His way and in His timing. As such, waiting upon the Lord is one of the most important expressions of our devotion to God and our submission to His will over our own desires. It proves through our actions that we are functioning by the nature of Jesus who submitted Himself and not by the nature of the evil one who exalted himself. Moreover, it is during these times when we must remain in submission to the authorities which God has appointed to rule over us. If God has truly called us to greatness then as we submit ourselves to Him, He will exalt us in due time.

*1 Peter 5:5-6: In the same way, you who are younger, **submit yourselves to your elders.** All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble." **Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.***

Temptation to Sin: Before Jesus began His ministry, He was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil for 40 days. (See Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13.) The word for *tempt* can also be translated test and, during this time, the devil tested Jesus with every possible provocation to sin and ungodliness. But Jesus never sinned because He was empowered by the nature of God within Him and He declared the Scriptures as a weapon of truth against the lies of the enemy.

Now, we have the Holy Spirit dwelling inside of us the same way Jesus did. Therefore, we have the same dynamis power in us to resist temptation and strengthen in character, virtue, and purity.

*1 John 3:9: **No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God.** (Also 1 John 5:18.)*

Religious Error: Throughout His ministry, Jesus was hated by the religious leaders who constantly attempted to trap Him into error or deception. Even with their extensive knowledge of the Scriptures, they did not recognize Jesus as God and so they challenged Him and tested Him. Jesus simply but strongly rebuked the religious leaders for their error. They were rendered incapable of answering His questions.

*John 3:10: **You are Israel's teacher,**" said Jesus, "and **do you not understand these things?***

John 5:39-40: **You study the Scriptures diligently** because you think that in them you have eternal life. **These are the very Scriptures that testify about me**, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

Matthew 22:46: **No one [of the Pharisees] could say a word in reply**, and from that day on **no one dared to ask him any more questions**.

Jesus also rebuked the religious leaders because they considered their man-made rules and traditions to be equal with or sometimes even superior to God's Law.

Mark 7:6-9: He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: " 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. **They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.**' **You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.**" And he continued, "You have a fine way of **setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!**"

Now, Jesus sends us out to be like Him and not be entangled by the traditions and religious observances that have entered into the Church if they are outside of the commands of Jesus and the Word of God. He promises us that when we stand before religious people, the Holy Spirit will give us wisdom that they will not be able to contest.

Mark 13:9-11: You must be on your guard. **You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues.** On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, **do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit.**

Other's Demands, Unbelief, and Offense: The religious leaders often demanded a sign from Jesus to prove His authority from God. He refused to indulge their demands. He knew that, even though He had performed many miraculous signs, no sign would be enough to convince them.

Matthew 12:39: He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! **But none will be given** it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. (See also Mark 8:12; Luke 11:29.)

Luke 16:31: He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, **they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.**'

Luke 20:8: Jesus said, "**Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.**"

Jesus also faced skeptics in His hometown and could not do many miracles there because of their unbelief. (See Matthew 13:53-58; Mark 6:1-6; Luke 4:14-30.) Plus, during His ministry years, Jesus was surrounded by ordinary people who wanted to believe Him, but somehow they could not quite get fully onboard in their faith that He is the Messiah. Jesus' most common expression to followers like these was, "O, you of little faith," which gently chided them for their unbelief and addition to other comments He made about their hard hearts or the fact that they were slow to believe. On a few occasions, with a sigh of exasperation, Jesus asked, "Do you still not believe?"

There were also those who proclaimed their undying loyalty and devotion to Jesus. In response, Jesus brought into view the ultimate price. (Consider Luke 9:57-58; 18:18-30; John 6:32-70.) When He taught things like this, which were difficult for His followers to comprehend, many people said that He had lost His mind, accused Him of being evil, or deserted Him. Jesus let the Scriptures and the works of God defend Him. He did not defend Himself or demand their loyalty or submission. Instead, He let them go their own way and blessed those who were not offended by Him.

John 6:60-61, 66-67: On hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, "**Does this offend you?** ... From this time **many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.**" **"You do not want to leave too, do you?"** Jesus asked the Twelve.

John 10:37-38: **Do not believe me unless I do the works of my Father.** But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, **believe the works**, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father." (See also John 5:36, 10:25, 14:11.)

Luke 7:22-23: So he replied to the messengers, "Go back and report to John **what you have seen and heard**: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. **Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.**" (See also Matthew 11:6.)

When Peter rebuked Jesus for talking about how He must suffer, be rejected and die, Jesus said, "Get behind me, Satan," rebuking the evil one who was speaking through Peter's mouth. Then, Jesus proceeded to walk towards His destiny as Savior of the world.

Now, Jesus sends us out to be like Him. We have nothing to prove to anyone and have no need to defend ourselves or to defend God for the way He is guiding our lives. And when those around us don't believe in full faith with us as we walk with Jesus, we can continue walking firmly and faithfully in obedience to the Lord while gently chiding them for their small view of God's greatness, or rebuking them for speaking for the enemy.

Counting the Cost: Jesus counted the cost before leaving the comforts of Heaven to fulfill His task from God. Then when the time approached for Jesus' greatest trial, He petitioned God in intense prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, asking if there was any other way for God's wrath to be satisfied. In Gethsemane, Jesus again counted the cost of laying down His life. Then, He submitted Himself willingly and offered all of Himself out of total devotion and love for God.

Matthew 26:38-39, 46: Then he said to them, "**My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.** Stay here and keep watch with me." Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "**My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.**" ... **Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!**"

Now, Jesus sends us out to offer our lives to God no matter what it costs us to follow Him. He made it clear in no uncertain terms that following Him costs everything and that His followers should *count the cost* before declaring our allegiance. To follow Jesus with all our heart and all we have, we must put to death our carnal nature and willful desires for what we want and how we want God to do things in order to submit ourselves to the will of God and see it fulfilled.

Luke 14:26-27, 33: If anyone comes to me and does not **hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters--yes, even their own life--such a person cannot be my disciple.** And whoever does not **carry their cross and follow me** cannot be my disciple. ... In the same way, those of you who do not **give up everything you have** cannot be my disciples. (Consider also Philippians 3:7-11.)

Betrayed, Falsely Accused, Unjustly Condemned: In His greatest trial, Jesus was betrayed by a close friend, turned over to the religious authorities, offered up to the governing world powers, given a mock trial which scarcely complied with any form of order or legal standards, and was sentenced to death at the hands of the very people that He came to save. The time had come for Jesus to fulfill the Scriptures written about His suffering and death so He did not rebuke or resist, nor would He allow any of His followers to do so.

John 18:11, 36: Jesus commanded Peter, "**Put your sword away!** Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" ... Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. **If it were, my servants would fight** to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place." (Also Matthew 26:52.)

Jesus was led like a lamb to the slaughter and did not open His mouth because He trusted God without reservation. (See Isaiah 53:7.) When Jesus stood before the religious leaders, before Pilate, before Herod, and before the people of Israel and the masses of the world, He never defended Himself.

Matthew 27:12: When he was accused by the **chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer.**

Mark 15:5: But **Jesus still made no reply**, and **Pilate** was amazed.

Luke 23:8-9: When **Herod** saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform a sign of some sort. He plied him with many questions, but **Jesus gave him no answer.**

Jesus warned us to understand that these types of things will happen to us as well, even from those we love the most. He told us in advance so that we, like Him, can stand firm in our faith.

Luke 21:16-19: **You will be betrayed** even by parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends, **and they will put some of you to death. Everyone will hate you because of me.** But not a hair of your head will perish. **Stand firm, and you will win life.**

John 16:1-2: All this **I have told you so that you will not fall away.** They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God.

Apparent Loss/Defeat and Shame: From an onlooker's perspective, it seemed that Jesus was a total failure. He willingly allowed darkness to have its glory for a moment as He endured the most brutal beating, scourging, and crucifixion the world has ever known. He took upon Himself all of the wrath, punishment, curse, sickness, and evil oppression of the world trusting that God would fulfill His purpose.

Luke 22:52-53: Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple guard, and the elders, who had come for him, "**Am I leading a rebellion**, that you have come with swords and clubs? Every day I was with you in the temple courts, and you did not lay a hand on me. **But this is your hour--when darkness reigns.**"

Philippians 2:6-8: Who, **being in very nature God**, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, **he made himself nothing** by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, **he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death-- even death on a cross!**

Even though Jesus counted the cost of giving His life, He scorned the shame. This means that Jesus knew the cost and thought it was a small price to pay in order to complete the work of God.

Hebrews 12:2b: **For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.**

Now, Jesus sends us out to face trials with faith and willingness because we consider our sufferings a light thing compared to the great value and worth of knowing Him. We can turn the other cheek, allow ourselves to appear to be failures in the eyes of this world, and die to ourselves because we trust that God is at work on our behalf and for our good. (See Romans 8:28.)

Philippians 3:10: I want to know Christ--yes, to know the power of his resurrection and **participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death**

Not Holding a Grudge: During all of this humiliation, physical pain, and spiritual anguish, Jesus maintained His heart of mercy and compassion – even for those who were crucifying Him. He forgave His enemies without animosity or contention. He wanted all of them to be saved and to have a chance to know God.

Luke 23:34a: Jesus said, "**Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.**"

Now, Jesus sends us out and gives us strength from within by the Holy Spirit to walk in love and mercy for others, including those who treat us shamefully and persecute us.

Matthew 5:44-45: *But I tell you, **love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.***

LEARNING OBEDIENCE

Jesus, the Son of Man, took on flesh and blood like ours and showed us how to endure through trials with perfect faith and right conduct. Through His suffering, Jesus learned the challenges we face as we try to obey God in the trials of this life. Therefore, He is able to be compassionate and understanding when we face trials and temptations in our lives. Praise God!

Hebrews 5:7-8: *During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. **So though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered***

Hebrews 4:15: *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, **but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet he did not sin.***

Most importantly, Jesus did not doubt God's love for Him. He did not doubt His Father's ability to do all that He had promised and planned. Jesus knew God was worthy of His submission, His hope, His faith, His love, His sacrifice, and His life.

Therefore, as we follow Jesus, not by outward imitation but by the inward leading of the Holy Spirit, we can anticipate that the Holy Spirit will guide us to respond rightly no matter what trial we may face. Assuredly, trials of righteousness will come to test our resolve, our devotion, our willingness, and our faith.

And so again I say, through every trial and through all the pain, when we hear the heart of God asking, *Do you believe that I am good?, Do you believe that I love you?, Do you believe that I am enough?, Do you believe what I have promised you?, and Do you believe that I have finished it?*, let us keep our eyes on Jesus and our minds on heaven and resoundingly answer back to Him, Yes!

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