

SUFFERING, THORNS, & MYSTERIES*

Jesus paid on the cross for our salvation, deliverance, healing, and sustenance and it is God's desire for us to experience the fullness of the blessing and benefits of what Jesus died to give us. This said, God has an enemy who launches attacks against our lives. This enemy is the father of lies and is constantly trying to convince us that God is not good, that Jesus is not Lord, and that we have done something to deserve less than the full experience of God's benefits and blessings as His children or that we have to do something to earn it.

While there are times when Jesus calls upon us to take up our cross, turn the other cheek, and follow Him in learning obedience through the things we suffer, there are other times when it is the enemy who is attempting to deceive us into accepting types of suffering which God has not ordained for us and which Jesus paid in full on the cross for us to be free from.

For starters, we are not perfected or sanctified through sickness or suffering. We are sanctified by the blood of Jesus, His Word, His name, and by the Holy Spirit. (See Hebrews 10:10,14; John 15:3, 17:17; 1 Corinthians 6:11; Titus 3:5.) Moreover, sharing in the sufferings of Christ does not include sickness. Jesus was never sick. The words used to describe sharing the *sufferings* of Christ are defined as *an external suffering, hardship, or pain of the same kind, or to suffer evils, particularly persecutions, in like manner*. Jesus suffered by giving up the splendors and privileges of heaven in order to be born into a flesh like ours and live completely dependent on God's provision. He suffered when He willingly offered Himself to uncompromisingly obey the will of God, even though it included rejection by His own people and by the world, having insults hurled at Him without retaliating, being led like a lamb to slaughter without defending Himself, and being whipped, scourged, beaten, mocked, betrayed, and ultimately crucified to death while praying for his crucifiers to be forgiven. (See Isaiah 53:3, 7; John 1:11; 1 Peter 2:23-24.) Through all of this, Jesus relentlessly trusted in God's goodness and power to bring His promises to pass and unwaveringly prioritized eternal matters over the things of this world. Even as a beloved Son, Jesus learned obedience through the things He suffered – not through accepting sickness or oppression. (See Hebrews 5:8.)

I am not saying that sickness is not suffering—it is. Since the fall of Adam, there have been many and various forms of suffering in this world, including sickness. However, when we read Scriptures about glorying or being patient in tribulation, rejoicing in suffering, or receiving the Lord's comfort in our trials, we should know that sickness and disease are not what is being addressed. (See Romans 5:3, 12:12; Colossians 1:24; 2 Corinthians 1:4.) Jesus did not comfort the sick in their sickness, ask them to be patient, or perpetuate their sickness in any way—He healed the sick. Therefore, healing and health are what Jesus demonstrated to be God's will for us and what He has made available to us when we place our faith in Him. While it is true that we are exhorted to rejoice always in all things, we should not embrace or glory in our sickness as the Lord's will for us when Jesus died on a cross to pay for our healing.

Here are some other common lies of the enemy on this subject.

A THORN IN THE FLESH

The enemy often succeeds in convincing believers that we will not be healed because our illness is a *thorn in the flesh*, like the Apostle Paul had. This is what the Apostle Paul said about his thorn in the flesh:

2 Corinthians 12:7b-9a: Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with

the Lord to take it away from me. But He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness."

The Apostle Paul was a Jewish man and, before becoming a follower of Jesus, he was schooled in the Scriptures with the finest education in the world in his day and was known to have excelled in his studies because of his extreme zealousness for God and His Word. (See Galatians 1:14.) In light of this, in several of Paul's letters, he used figures of speech from the Scriptures that were commonly known among his people. For example, in Paul's letter to Timothy, he said that the Lord had saved *him from the lion's mouth*. (See 2 Timothy 4:17.) In this, Paul was not referring to a literal lion. In Jewish history, there was a man who was literally delivered from the lion's mouth by God—Daniel. (See Daniel 6; Hebrews 11:33.) Hence, Paul was using an expression common to the Jewish people as a means of saying that even though no human had come to his defense, the Lord had spared him from enemies seeking to destroy him.

It was in this same manner that Paul used the expression *thorn in the flesh*. Paul did not mean that he had a literal thorn in his flesh but was using a figure of speech from the Scriptures. In the history of Israel, the Lord instructed the Israelites to destroy and drive out all the inhabitants who were occupying the Promised Land. He warned them that the inhabitants from the other nations would become like *thorns in the flesh* if the Israelites failed to drive them out completely because the wrong beliefs and practices of the nations would steer the Israelites away from worshiping Him as the only true God.

*Numbers 33:52, 55: **Drive out all the inhabitants of the land before you. Destroy all their carved images and their cast idols, and demolish all their high places. ... But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land, those you allow to remain will become barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides. They will give you trouble in the land where you will live.***

*Joshua 23:13: Then you may be sure that the LORD your God will no longer **drive out these nations before you. Instead, they will become snares and traps for you, whips on your backs and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land, which the LORD your God has given you.***

*Judges 2:3 ESV: So now I say, I will not drive them out before you, but **they shall become thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you.***

*Ezekiel 28:24: No longer will the people of Israel have **malicious neighbors who are painful briars and sharp thorns.** Then they will know that I am the Sovereign LORD.*

When Paul wrote about his *thorn in the flesh*, it was in a letter to the believers in Corinth in response to the fact that false apostles were attacking Paul and mocking his apostolic authority. The entire chapter leading up to his use of the expression *thorn in the flesh* pertains to persecution from these false apostles.

*2Corinthians 11:23-28 - Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have **worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.***

Paul was literally, brutally, repeatedly, and physically assaulted by people in this world who refused to believe Jesus and by worldly believers who rejected his God-given authority. His boasting in these persecutions immediately precedes and follows his use of the expression *thorn in the flesh*. Accordingly, it seems fairly clear to me that persecution is what Paul was referring to as his *thorn in the flesh*. For someone to claim that Paul's thorn is some kind of illness or disease seems like a drastic leap out of the context of

his letter to the Corinthians and the whole of Scripture. Also, since many claim that Paul's *thorn in the flesh* was a problem with his eyes or point to the bodily illness that first brought Paul to the Galatians, it is worth noting that Paul arrived in Galatia after being stoned by the crowd at Lystra so inhumanely that they thought he was dead. (See Galatians 4:13; Acts 14:19.) It would not be surprising if his body and his eyes were in a weakened or infirm state after such treatment.

But let's not stop there. We may still be left with the question of why God would allow *thorns in the flesh* in the first place, especially for His chosen people and the most influential apostle the world has ever known. Fortunately, God is so good that He states His purposes clearly. The nations that the Israelites were unable to drive out were left there by God in order to test the Israelites in their faithfulness to Him as the one true God and to teach them His methods for fighting battles.

*Judges 3:1-4: These are the nations **the LORD left to test all those Israelites** who had not experienced any of the wars in Canaan (**he did this only to teach warfare** to the descendants of the Israelites who had not had previous battle experience); the five rulers of the Philistines, all the Canaanites, the Sidonians, and the Hivites living in the Lebanon mountains from Mount Baal Hermon to Lebo Hamath. **They were left to test the Israelites to see whether they would obey the LORD's commands**, which he had given their ancestors through Moses.*

God uses trials and persecution from unbelievers and false prophets to train us in the way of righteousness. (See Deuteronomy 13:1-11; Matthew 13:28-30; 2 Thessalonians 2:11; Hebrews 5:8.) We must never forget that we follow a crucified King who calls upon us to take up our own cross and follow after Him in these types of sufferings. (See Luke 9:23.) God is not going to take away the cross that Jesus told us to carry. When we look at Paul's thorn in this way, it makes perfect sense that God refused to take the thorn away and that Paul learned to delight in it. Suffering for the name of Jesus and for the Kingdom of God due to persecution is cause for great rejoicing. (See Matthew 5:10-13.) Paul's thorn was not sickness. This leaves us with no excuse for settling for receiving less than the healing Jesus died to give us.

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY OR GOD ALLOWED IT

Another tactic of the enemy against believers is to convince them that God's sovereign control over all things means that their sickness is from God. This is a lie.

We live in a fallen world and disease is a part of it. Since the fall of Adam, we earn or deserve sickness through disobedience. When God redeemed Israel and gave His Law, He revealed that the way to stay in health and live a long life is through obedience to Him. When we violate God's Law, we deserve a penalty which can include sickness—the wages of sin is death. (See Romans 6:23.) If we had not sinned, we would not have warranted punishment. Righteousness is our protection and the only way we can remain on the path of life and health.

So far, the "God allowed it" argument seems to be right and you could even add, "we deserve it." However, the way to pay the penalty for disobedience is through a blood sacrifice of high enough value to reconcile us to God and restore us to righteousness and its benefits, including health. Of course, this is exactly what Jesus came to do for us. His blood perpetually pays the penalty for everything we have ever done or could ever do to earn or deserve God's punishment. (See 1 John 1:7.) As long as our faith is in Jesus' perfect righteousness on our behalf, we can receive our healing as a free gift. Moreover, Jesus gave us authority over every disease, unclean spirit, and over the enemy so that we can forbid sickness in our lives. (See Luke 9:1, 10:19; Matthew 18:18.)

Therefore, not only does God **not** allow sickness—He has paid the price for us to not be sick. Sickness violates the covenant we have with God through faith in Jesus who redeemed us from the effects of the fall of man and transferred us to the Kingdom of Heaven where sickness is forbidden. It is our own wrong understanding of what Jesus has done for us, our unbelief in the benefits that God extends freely to us in the New Covenant, our unwarranted fear of an enemy who has been thoroughly defeated, or our

determination to do things our own way rather than being led by the Holy Spirit that gives sickness a place in our lives. God does not allow sickness—we allow it through unbelief.

GOD IS TEACHING

Another common erroneous belief is to say of sickness that, “God is teaching me through this.” This is a lie. Not only does God **not** chastise us through sickness—He laid all sickness upon Jesus so that we can be healed. Jesus took all of our chastisement and all of our sickness upon Himself so that, through faith in Him, we have been healed by His wounds. (See Isaiah 53:4-5.)

Because of our faith in Jesus, God treats us as His beloved children and does not use sickness to chastise us. As if it is not enough to say that a loving Father would never inflict sickness on their own son or daughter, Jesus is our example of life as a child of God and as a beloved Son, Jesus was never sick.

God does not teach us about His goodness by being evil. God does not teach us about His faithfulness by being fickle. God does not teach us about His love and mercy by attacking our bodies with disease and torment. Moreover, God has given us a teacher and it is not sickness—it is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is constantly teaching us, leading us in truth, guiding us in paths of righteousness for the Lord's glory, and reminding us of everything that Jesus taught. (See John 14:26.) We have to allow the Holy Spirit to renew our mind, will, and emotions so that we come fully into alignment with God's good will toward us in Jesus.

In the name of “God teaching us,” we will allow ourselves to be diverted by learning techniques, methods, and teachings which are birthed out of trusting in the knowledge of good and evil (including diets, supplements, medications, etc.) rather than righteousness as a free gift from God and healing by His wounds. In our desperate quest to be well, we may acquire lots of knowledge about God and still be sick because we never learn to believe that it is God's will for us to be well. (See 2 Timothy 3:5, 7; Colossians 2:23.) But as we submit ourselves to God and resist the evil one, he will flee from us and so will sickness.

IT'S A MYSTERY

When the enemy pushes people past their ability to comprehend and believe God, they will often say, “God works in mysterious ways,” or “It's a mystery” to let themselves off the hook of persisting in faith.

God does not work in mysterious ways—He works according to His Word. While we don't know everything about God and can still be filled with childlike wonder about Him, we cannot use God's “mysteriousness” as an excuse for not receiving something from Him that Jesus died to give us.

God has revealed the biggest mystery of all redemptive history to us so that we can steward the mystery to the rest of the world. The mystery is this: Jesus died so we can have right standing with God and have the Spirit of the Lord dwelling inside of us. (See Romans 16:25-26; 1 Corinthians 2:7, 4:1; Ephesians 3:4-5; Colossians 1:26-27, 2:2; 1 Timothy 3:16.) The mystery was hidden in ages past, but now it is out in the open! Moreover, God has not locked up His Kingdom and blessings in secrecy and guesswork. We are God's children, and He desires to open all the storehouses of heaven to us. In fact, Jesus calls us His friends because He tells us everything that the Father has told Him and is willing to open up all of the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven to us. (See John 15:15; Matthew 13:11.)

This is why we are encouraged to keep on asking, seeking, and knocking so that we can continue to receive, find, and have more and more of God's goodness opened to us. (See Matthew 7:7-8.) When we do this, we discover that the mystery of God has been revealed and the things that God has revealed have been revealed so that we may do them. (See Deuteronomy 29:29)

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