

WHY DO GOD'S CHILDREN SUFFER?

This question has confronted God's children throughout the ages. In all probability, every believer, at some time, has been greatly perplexed over God's dealings with His children. We often wonder why misunderstanding and suffering are necessary when we are honestly and sincerely trying to do the will of God. Job, who was one of the world's greatest sufferers, was perplexed over the same question.

This question is exceedingly difficult to answer. Multitudes have thought seriously about it and have given various answers to it. It deals with a matter which has a large element of mystery in it. In fact, the complete answer to this question will not be known until we get to heaven. Yet, the Bible contains some exceptionally helpful thoughts concerning the problem of the suffering of God's children. In the light of our subject, we shall consider: --

I. The Reality of Their Sufferings.

In all of life there is an undertone of suffering. It invades every home. An old Spanish proverb points to this familiar fact: "No home is there anywhere that does not sooner or later have its hush."

We suffer in various ways in this life. We suffer through physical ill health. We suffer loss when temporal reverses come. We suffer disappointment when our plans are broken and our programs are shattered. We suffer regret and remorse over actual wrongdoing. We suffer mentally and spiritually; and this deranges our perceptions, distorts our visions, and paralyzes our energies. We often suffer from misconstrued motives, unappreciated sacrifices, unrealized aims, thwarted efforts, and miscarried hopes.

That suffering is a reality in the lives of God's children can be proved by four things; namely,

1. Experience.

The fact of suffering is in evidence in the lives of God's children, as most of us know from experience.

2. Observation.

There is a vast amount of suffering in the lives of God's children who are living today. We know godly people who are suffering greatly. Some of the best and most godly people are among the most acute sufferers.

3. History.

Among the most beautiful characters the world has ever known were men and women who suffered greatly.

Polycarp, one of the Apostolic Fathers and a famous Christian martyr, was a pupil and a personal friend of the Apostle John. After serving as Bishop of Smyrna for some time, the celebrated Polycarp was arrested and brought before the Roman proconsul to be tried on the charge of being a Christian. Attempts were made by the officials to induce him to recant, but without effect. The proconsul urged him to "revile Christ" and promised if he would consent to abjure his faith that he would set him at liberty, but Polycarp steadfastly refused to yield. After repeated appeals, he made the memorable answer, "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He has done me naught but good. How then can I speak evil of my Lord and Saviour who hath saved me?" Those words only intensified the fury of the mob, who demanded that he should be flung to the wild beasts; but he was sentenced to be burned. With calm dignity and unflinching courage, he joyfully went up to the stake, and amidst the flames praised God for having "deemed him worthy to be numbered among His martyrs, to drink the cup of Christ's sufferings." Thus, he crowned a noble life with an heroic death.

Fanny J. Crosby, at the age of six weeks, lost her eyesight as the result of an illness. About forty years later, she began writing hymns. She became a great hymn writer, and although she was blind she has given the world more gospel hymns than any other writer -- more than six thousand of them coming from her pen. Many of them are perennially popular and have solaced and inspired millions of people in various parts of the world. The chorus of "Close to Thee" typifies the faith of her entire Christian life:

"Close to Thee, close to Thee;
All along my pilgrim journey,
Saviour, let me walk with Thee."

4. The Bible.

Job is perhaps the outstanding example of a mortal sufferer. Just recall the character of his troubles and sufferings.

(1) The loss of property.

God allowed all of Job's possessions to be swept from him. The richest man in the east became a bankrupt in one day. That in itself would have driven many into absolute despair.

(2) The loss of family.

His children were killed in a terrible storm. What was Job's reaction to this? "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord," was his response.

(3) The loss of health.

He was covered from head to foot with a loathsome disease.

(4) The loss of position.

The "greatest man in the east" became the most loathsome object in the east. He who sat among princes was compelled to sit "among ashes."

(5) The loss of sympathy.

Even his wife turned against him. Fair-weather friends always get ship-wrecked in a storm like that.

(6) The loss of his way.

He could not pray satisfactorily. It was this trial that caused him to weep and say that he wished he had never been born. He preferred death to life without a conscious presence of God.

After Job had all of these troubles and sufferings, he simply stated, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him."

Christ Jesus suffered intensely. After He was laid on His back on the cross, they drove the spikes through the palms of His hands and through His feet. When the cross was erected, He was left to suffer a lingering and painful death as the blood dripped from His head, His hands, and His feet. It was through infinite suffering that Christ redeemed the fallen human race.

Experience, observation, history, and the Bible prove that suffering is often in evidence in the lives of God's children. No child of God will fully escape suffering in this life.

II. The Reasons for Their Sufferings.

1. Some unsatisfactory explanations.

(1) All suffering is an illusion.

Certain misguided persons deny the reality of suffering, but their denial does not eliminate suffering. The theory that all suffering is an illusion is an affront to the intelligence and should be rejected by every sensible person.

(2) All suffering is a punishment for sin.

Job's tormentors observed his terrible suffering and concluded that he was suffering because of sin which he had not confessed. They believed that God would cause his suffering to cease if he would forsake and confess sin. They were sincere in their belief, but they were utterly wrong.

At the time of Christ's ministry in the flesh, this idea was prevalent. Jesus and His disciples passed a man who had been blind from his birth; and the disciples asked Jesus, "Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?" That was a foolish question. How could the man have sinned before he was born? Jesus did not comment on their foolishness, but simply corrected their false idea by saying, "Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents." Jesus did not mean that either of the three was sinless, but rather that his suffering was not punishment for sin -- neither his own sin nor the sin of his parents.

Even some of God's children are made miserable today by the thought that, because suffering is their lot in life, it must be due to some special sin on their part. Frequently, one asks, "What have I done that this has happened to me?" But, suffering is not necessarily a result of wrongdoing.

2. Some satisfactory reasons.

(1) Suffering is for the good of the sufferers.

God has intended for it to be a blessing and a means of grace to us. It comes into our lives to make us wiser and better and more useful. There are blessings that come to those who are laid aside by sickness and suffering which they never would have received had they remained robust and vigorous. During sickness people become better acquainted with themselves, with others, and with God.

a. Suffering develops the grace of humility.

Paul was eminently susceptible to spiritual pride. He was thoroughly aware of his exceptional gifts, exalted privileges, world-wide mission, tremendous influence, and brilliant successes. Consequently, he was in great danger of being lifted-up-beyond-measure because of these things. For this reason, the Lord permitted him to suffer in order that He might keep him humble.

b. Suffering develops the grace of patience.

Paul said, "We glory in tribulation also knowing that tribulation worketh patience."

c. Suffering develops the grace of sympathy.

There is no teacher like experience. When we pass through suffering, we become more sympathetic with others. One cannot sympathize with another about something of which he knows nothing.

d. Suffering is a polisher of character.

Suffering often subdues the heart and brings it into sweet harmony with God's will. It is necessary sometimes for us to pass through the crucible of suffering before we will be what He would have us to be and do what He would have us to do.

e. Suffering is a pathway to devotion.

Suffering has caused many to draw closer to the Lord. Bunyan said, "The chamber of affliction is often the chapel of devotion." That was true in the case of George Matheson, the famous blind poet-preacher of Scotland. As a boy he had trouble with his eyes. He was a brilliant student and became an accomplished scholar. Upon the eve of his graduation from the university, he was stricken with blindness. Added to this handicap and grief was another-- the young woman to whom he was betrothed refused to marry him because of his affliction. He was plunged into a veritable Gethsemane of sorrow. In time, however, he became aware that Another was "acquainted with grief." As he thought of her love that had meant so much to him, now gone out of his life forever, he realized that there was a greater love that never fails. He went to his desk and, sick at heart for the love that had let him go, wrote the great hymn, "O Love That Will Not Let Me Go."

(2) Suffering is for the glory of God.

For this reason God permitted the sickness and death of Lazarus. When his sisters informed Jesus of his sickness, the Saviour said, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby." Through suffering one really learns that "My grace is sufficient for thee."

III. The Results of Their Sufferings.

The ultimate question is not "Why has this happened to me?" but rather, "Since it has happened to me, how am I to face it."

1. Some undesirable results.

(1) An attitude of self-pity.

Some surrender to suffering, become sorry for themselves, and spend their days in self-pitying invalidism. They let suffering plunge their lives into despair and wreck their faith on futility.

(2) An attitude of resentment.

Some grow bitter and resentful on account of their suffering. Job's wife advocated that he "curse God and be done with the whole thing." Oftimes, sufferers turn away from God. They cease church attendance and Christian activity. But how utterly foolish and futile! Bitterness and rebellion are poor panaceas for suffering. Never let suffering drive you away from the Lord.

2. Some desirable results.

(1) Earnest prayer.

When we suffer, let us pray for deliverance from suffering if it is the Lord's will for us to be delivered. But, above everything else, let us be willing for the Lord to have His way. Have the attitude that Jesus had when He prayed, "Nevertheless, Father, not as I will, but as Thou wilt." If we are not delivered from suffering, then let us pray for God's presence and help in our sufferings.

"O what peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry
Ev'rything to God in prayer."

(2) Christlike resignation.

This will increase our faith and bring us nearer to God. It will make us better persons. So, in the day of suffering and trial we should take it all to Jesus and let Him solve it according to His perfect will.

(3) Greater usefulness.

After all, our chief concern with the dark fact of suffering is not to find an explanation, but a victory. It is not to elaborate a theory, but to lay hold upon a power; not an explanation of this thing, but grace and help to bear it and to be more useful because of it. The Christian's answer to the mystery of suffering is not an explanation, but a reinforcing presence, Christ to stand beside you through the darkness. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me." You may not be able to tell why God permits you to suffer, but you will hardly insist on a full reply to that question when you are assured that He Himself comes right down into your heart and life and shares the pain that afflicts you. What more can you ask of Him than that?