

## Suffering: Pathway to Growth and Glory!

1 Peter 4:12-19

A number of years ago, Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a book entitled, *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*. One of the ideas offered in the book is that while God remains all-loving, He has ceased to be all-powerful. According to Kushner, in the beginning God was both loving and omnipotent. But evil made its unwelcome intrusion into the universe, presenting God with a malevolent, opposing force with which He has not been able to deal thus far. God is still love, but His power has apparently been diminished. He wants to eradicate the universe of all evil, and He is attempting to do so, but alas, He is unable to accomplish this noble task.

Such theology is light years off course! First, it reduces God Almighty to something less than He really is. Second, it fails to understand that the Lord God has reasons for allowing evil and the resulting suffering that is always the child of evil, and that He has chosen to work through the problem of evil for some greater good. Could God have destroyed evil the moment it was conceived in Lucifer? Yes! But that would likely have required the destruction of Lucifer along with it. That may well have raised troubling questions in the minds of the other angelic beings. It is doubtful that they would understand why God would suddenly turn on one of His archangels with no *apparent* reason. It is logical to assume, then, that the Lord God Almighty chose to work through the problem of evil. He must have been confident that His wisdom and incomparably great power would not only enable Him to overcome evil, but would also enable His followers to overcome it.

Unlike Rabbi Kushner, the Apostle Paul had no doubt concerning the power of God, for in his letter to the Ephesians he writes:

“I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his **incomparably great power** for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead ...” (1:18-19a)

Our God’s power is incomparably great. It is the power to raise the dead; it is the power to transform something ordinary into something glorious. Peter encourages us with this thought: if we are participating in the sufferings of Christ, being insulted because of the name of Christ, then we are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on us. Paul wrote that:

“Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” ( Phil. 4:20-21).

Speaking of the difference God’s power will make, Paul added:

“The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power.” ( 1 Cor. 15:42-43).

This is wonderful, but let us not merely focus on the human body. God’s incomparably great power is being brought to bear on much more than mere flesh and blood. His purpose in working through the problem of evil is that those made in His image might be brought to full maturity, that we might learn to triumph over evil in all its forms, and that in triumphing over evil we shall be called “overcomers.”

The principle to be grasped is this: God has chosen not to shield us from the trials and tribulations of life, nor from the crucibles and vicissitudes of life, but rather to indwell us and invest His power and strength in us.

He means to accomplish a greater good than our mere comfort. He means to develop our maturity and moral progress so that we become like Christ in character. With our God, it is a matter of *character over comfort*.

Naturalists tell us that in any forest trees are strengthened by the cold, harsh winds of life. Often they are on a hilltop or mountainside, unshielded from such winds. Young saplings may often be bent over, but those trees that have been exposed to harsh winds – and have not been uprooted – grow to be the strongest trees in the forest. So it is with people! Those upon whom the cold, harsh winds of life have blown, those who have been buffeted by winds of suffering, are the strongest – if their lives are built on the sure foundation of faith and trust in God. Jesus talked about this in clear terms:

“Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash” ( Matt. 7:24-27).

Well, this just amplifies and reinforces what Peter is telling us. If we are suffering for being a Christian and if our life is built on the sure foundation of the Word of God, then we will stand when the cold, harsh winds of life buffet us. We will not need to be ashamed, neither will we need to fear, nor will we fall. Some people suffer as a direct result of their own sinful choices, because of their own folly leading to wrong-doing, but those who suffer for the cause of Christ will bring glory to God as He strengthens and refines them in character.

I do not think it is possible to really follow the Lord and make progress in our discipleship without experiencing a measure of suffering. The Lord said that just as the world hated him it would hate his followers:

“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” ( John 15:18-19).

“In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

Through suffering, we should gain an understanding of how to apply God's word to real situations and problems. This kind of wisdom cannot be gained without suffering. Likewise, only the one who has trusted God in the midst of suffering has experienced faith at the deepest level. Our friend Peter, at the very beginning of his first letter, writes about the believer's hope through the resurrection of Christ, and the inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for all those who through faith are shielded by God's power. Then Peter adds:

“In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” ( 1 Peter 1:6-7).

One of the great preachers and Christian leaders of the twentieth century was G. Campbell Morgan. The story is told of an occasion on which he and a friend went to hear an up and coming young preacher. After the service, the friend asked Morgan, “Well, what did you think of him?”

Morgan replied, “He is a good preacher. When he is older, and after he has suffered he may become a great preacher.” Morgan knew that those whose lives are spent on beds of ease, and those to whom everything comes with ease, seldom develop true strength of character.

Sir Malcolm Muggeridge, that brilliant twentieth century broadcaster who became a Christian in the latter part of his life, used to enjoy looking back at the trials and tribulations that had helped to shape and mould him. He said, “Eliminate the cold, harsh winds of life and the result would not make life delectable but banal, trivial, and unbearable.” He knew that just as precious metal is purified and strengthened by being put into the crucible, so is the character of the man or woman who resolves to trust and obey God – even in the midst of the storm.

What does Peter say our response to suffering ought to be? I see three things here in 1 Peter 4:

- First, do not be surprised at painful trials, as though something strange were happening to you (v. 12). In a fallen world that is hostile to Christ, those who live for Christ can expect to experience hostility.
- Second, rejoice that you are participating in the sufferings of Christ (v. 13). What better way is there to honor the Master than to identify with Him completely – even in His sufferings? Can we really expect to honor the Lord by being his fair weather friends?
- Third, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good (v. 19). Remember what Paul said about this: “Stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Cor. 15:58).

I believe that in the near future there will be battles to be fought if the church in the west is to fulfill her mission as the Lord’s return approaches. That mission is to be salt and light in a decadent and dying culture, and to make disciples. We may well have to endure the kind of persecution that many of our Christian brothers and sisters in second and third world countries are already enduring. What they are going through looks very much like what the early church endured. I note with great interest that in each of our Lord’s letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor there is wonderful promise given to those who overcome (Rev. 2:7,11,17,26; 3:5,12,21):

- “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”
- “He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.”
- “To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.”
- “To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations.”
- “He who overcomes will ... be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life ...”
- “He who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God ...”
- “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne.”

These are the promises that were given to the early believers who suffered under oppressors like the Caesars and Nero. Today we name our sons Peter and Paul, and we name our dogs Caesar and Nero! How much better it is to suffer for the cause of Christ, and to experience such suffering as the pathway to growth and glory. Let us pray for each other. Let us triumph together over evil, that in the coming eternal ages we may be called “Overcomers!”