

THE PURPOSE OF SUFFERING

by Harold S. Martin

Used by permission of the **Brethren Revival Fellowship (BRF)**, published in **BRF Witness**,
May/June, 1979

In the Book of **Job** we are told that “**man who is born of woman is of few days, and full of trouble.**” All of us have sensed that life seems short, and most of us have had plenty of troubles. We are living in a world of trouble. This world is filled with heartaches and suffering of all kinds. No one is immune from troubles. The rich suffer as well as the poor. The proud suffer, and so do the humble. The sinner suffers, and so does the saint. Wherever one turns, he finds suffering and sorrow and heartaches. There’s suffering from sickness, suffering from the infirmities of advancing age, suffering from disease, suffering from poverty, suffering from mental anguish-and on and on one could go.

There’s the suffering of the young wife who is lost in despair because of the cruelty of a drunken husband. There’s the mother whose only daughter “had” to marry the young man she was dating. At seventeen years of age (when other girls are still in high school) she is far away from her parents, cramped into a small apartment, caring for a husband and a new baby. All this brings on mental anguish, which is perhaps one of the most severe forms of suffering. There’s also the suffering that comes from parting from those whom we love. We clasp hands and walk together, and work and laugh and weep together—but after a while, we must separate. Someday we’ll meet those we love face to face for the last time here in this life. Someday we’ll work together and sit down at a meal together-and although we feel the same as ever-the messenger of death will be lurking in the background, and there’s going to be a heart-rending separation. There’s the suffering of the young boy who is a victim of polio. He has to spend the rest of his days, scarcely even able to turn over in his bed. All these are experiences of suffering that we face.

Why is there so much suffering here in this life? The Bible teaches that suffering in general, came into this world as a result of sin. In other words, if there had been no sin in the world, we would have reason to believe there would never have been any suffering. This doesn’t mean that all suffering is the result of one’s own sin, nor does

it mean that the person who suffers, isn't leading the right kind of life. Job's comforters made this mistake. They reasoned that suffering is the result of sin (and so it is; suffering was part of the curse that God pronounced upon mankind after the fall). But these men reasoned that because Job was a great sufferer, therefore he must be a great sinner. One of Job's friends said, "Who ever perished, being innocent? Or where were the righteous cut off?" (Job 4:7). In other words, he said, "The innocent don't suffer, and therefore because you are suffering, you must be guilty." The truth of the matter is that many people suffer (not because of their own sin, but because of the sins of other people. There are wives who suffer because of the sins of wayward husbands. There are children who suffer because of the sins of their parents. There are whole nations that suffer because of the sins of wicked leaders. And so, we say that not all suffering is the result of one's own sin.

However, some suffering is the result of our own sins. When Paul wrote the Church of Corinth about their abuse of the love feast service, he said, "He that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this cause, many are weak and sickly among you" (1 Cor. 11:30). Sickness and even death in some cases, are due to the Christian's failure to confess sin, and to judge wicked habits in his own life, and God sends the suffering as a punishment for sin.

On the other hand, while all suffering is the result of sin, suffering is not always the result of specific sin in one's own life. If you are suffering from sickness, or from heavy burdens, or from persecution-and you've honestly confessed all known and doubtful sin in your life, and you've searched out your own heart before God (and you still continue to suffer)-you can rest assured that God has some greater purpose in mind for you, and that His plan can only be accomplished in the school of affliction and suffering.

We don't have much trouble understanding why wicked people suffer. We know that "the way of the transgressor is hard," and that "whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap." But we find a different problem when we see God's saints passing through trials and troubles. Why do some of the most noble people of God have to wear sackcloth on their hearts almost continually? This is a big question (and there are some things we'll never understand until we're safe in the arms of Jesus), but the Bible does give some light on this vexing question, "Why do the righteous suffer?" We invite your attention to four Scriptural reasons why a righteous person may be called upon to suffer.

1. SUFFERING GIVES JESUS A CHANCE TO GET GLORY

You remember the account in John 9, of the man who was born blind, and how Jesus had opened his eyes. The disciples said to Jesus, "Who did sin, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). You see, like many of us, they thought this affliction

was brought on because of his own sin, or perhaps because of the sin of his forebears. But Jesus answered the question: “Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents, but that the works of God should be made manifest in him (John 9:3). The Lord didn’t mean that this man never committed any sin, nor that his parents were perfect, but He was simply answering their question—and in this particular case, the suffering was not a punishment for his own sins, but rather, the affliction came upon him to give Jesus a chance to reveal His power and glory.

It was for this same reason that Lazarus was permitted to die. Jesus said in John 11:4 (when He had first heard that Lazarus was sick): “This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby.” When Lazarus was sick, his sisters called for Jesus, but Jesus did a strange thing. Instead of coming immediately, He waited until Lazarus was dead and had been buried four days. When He got there, Jesus merely spoke the Word, and Lazarus came back from death. As a result of this miracle, many of the Jews were convinced that Jesus was really the Son of God, and many believed on Him. Of course, the death of Lazarus meant some heartaches for Mary and Martha, and the fact that Jesus didn’t come immediately must have been even more disturbing-but think of the glory Jesus got out of it. People were saved through

Many of us have never experienced prolonged and terrible suffering. But one of the grandest opportunities you will ever get to glorify God, will be in the hour of distress and suffering. When everything is rosy, and the pastures are green, and the waters are still-and you look up and say, “Praise God from whom all blessings flow,” the world won’t be especially impressed. They’ll say, “Why shouldn’t he be thankful, everything’s going his way?” But when the shadows deepen, and the clouds begin to gather, and the sorrows pour in-if in such a time, you can look up through your tears and like Job, say, “The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away, blessed be the name of the Lord,”- the world will be convinced, and they’ll say, “There must be something to this Christianity after all,” and Jesus will get glory.

You see, your suffering and sorrow and troubles – these are the raw materials out of which you can weave a garment for the glory of God. God often permits His children to suffer, so that the world can see the sweetness with which they are able to bear it. The hymn writer says:

*“Some through the waters; some through the flood;
Some through the fire; but all through the blood.
Some through great trial-but God gives a song,
In the night seasons, and all the day long.”*

Christians are called upon to suffer as well as non-Christians. Jesus told a story about two houses, one built by a wise man, the other by a foolish man; one built upon rock, the other upon the sand; but the rains descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against both those houses. Serving Christ does not free us from suffering, but it does give us strength and grace to bear the trials, and to become more than conquerors over every test of life. If you can sing praises to God in the hour of suffering and trial, you'll bring glory to Jesus.

2. SUFFERING IS CHASTENING TO MAKE US HOLY

The nature of divine chastening is described in the twelfth chapter of **Hebrews**. We're told here that God chastens (punishes) because He loves us, and He does it for our good. **Verse 10** says that He chastens that "we might be partakers of His holiness." One of God's primary objectives for all of us is that we might be holy. **Ephesians 1:4** says "According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love." **1 Thessalonians 4:7** says "God has not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness." **1 Peter 1:15** says "But as he which has called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation." These Scriptures make it clear that God's purpose for us is that we should be holy. And God accomplishes His purpose in one of two ways. His first plan is that we should willingly make a complete surrender, gladly desiring to do His will, and to do what He says. But if we become stubborn and rebellious, sometimes God has to lay us on our backs, in order to get us to say, "Not my will, but thine be done."

When we punish our children, we do it not because we hate them and want to punish them, but because we love them, and want the best for them in life. And just so God chastens us-not because He hates us and takes pleasure in punishing us, but because He loves us too much to let us go on and make shipwreck of our lives.

There are some fine qualities of life which many times are learned only as one walks in the dark valley of suffering. The poet says:

*"I walked a mile with Sorrow
And ne'er a word said she;
But oh, the things I learned from her,
When sorrow walked with me."*

Sometimes we suffer in order that God might teach us some lessons in prayer. All of us know that we call upon God much more earnestly and much more frequently, when His chastening rod is on us, than we do in the day of prosperity. The **107th Psalm** repeatedly says, "They cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and He saved them out of their distresses." We know that many times we don't really pray; but when trouble

comes, then we call on God from the bottom of our hearts. Sometimes we suffer in order that God might teach us lessons in humility. Most of us tend to think that we're a little bit better than certain other people, and we secretly flatter ourselves that we're "not as other men." Suffering cuts the props from under us and gives us a sense of need and dependence upon God, and we see that we're only poor worms of the dust. These things are good for us.

Children usually don't appreciate correction when they are getting it, but in later years, they often come to see the value of discipline, and recognize that it made them stronger and better characters. And just so we should accept chastening as coming from the hand of an all-wise God, who molds us and makes us a thing of beauty for His own glory. The Psalmist knew that he was a better man because of his affliction. He says that before his experience of suffering, he was going astray, but suffering was God's way of bringing him back. I'm sure that hundreds of others down through the centuries could testify of a similar experience. Afflictions are designed to make us partakers of God's holiness.

3. SUFFERING FITS US FOR THE MINISTRY OF SYMPATHY

God gives special comfort to His own children in the hour of suffering, and Paul says that we receive this strength and help from the hand of God, so that we can extend sympathy to others in the hour of trouble. The Bible says, "Blessed be God ... who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted to God" (2 Corinthians 1:4). The comfort we receive from God is to enable us to impart comfort to others.

This old world is filled with suffering and heartaches, and one of the greatest needs suffering people have, is for someone who can comfort them and sympathize with them in their trouble. And the only way we can really learn to comfort others and to sympathize with them, is to suffer ourselves. We can't comfort others until we ourselves have been comforted of God. We can't sympathize with those in sorrow unless we have suffered ourselves. We can't understand the loneliness of others unless we have been lonely ourselves. We can't weep with those that weep unless we have been bereaved ourselves. There are some things in life that can't be learned in the schools, and that is one of them. We have to learn how to sympathize with others, by actual experience. Most of us have already learned that the person who can help us most in the hour of trial, is the one who has already passed through an experience somewhat like ours. This is another reason God permits righteous people to suffer. The fires of affliction make us tenderhearted, and sympathetic toward others—and this results in a greater compassion for other people.

4. SUFFERING TURNS OUR ATTENTION TOWARD HEAVEN

One of the besetting sins of the saints is earthliness. Most people live as though they were never going to die. They follow business and pleasure and politics and science as if this earth were their eternal home. They plan and scheme for the future like the rich fool in the parable Jesus told. And many of us have a tendency to do exactly the same thing. Thank God, He sends affliction and sickness. This takes our eyes away from money and pleasure and position and makes us think seriously of God. The Lord often permits suffering so that we don't become too much in love with this world, and the things of this world.

Sometimes it takes sicknesses and sorrow and disaster and vanished hopes and shattered dreams to bring us to the end of ourselves and turn us to God. The suffering and sadness that we experience often gives us a desire to leave this world, and to enter our rest in Heaven. Even the loss of a loved one in the hour of death—while it brings heartaches to us—often turns our attention toward Heaven. Most of us have had this experience. We know that Heaven is a place, and that it is being prepared for those who love God. But we only come to really appreciate Heaven when one of our own dear loved ones crosses the border into the eternal world.

Heaven seemed closer to King David after his little child had died. The Bible says (**2 Samuel 12:18**) that for seven days and seven nights, David fasted and wept and prayed that God would spare his sick child—but finally he received notice that the child was dead. Two little eyelids had been gently closed; two little hands were folded over the silent bosom; one little heart was forever still. David wiped away the tears from his eyes, and ate food, and found comfort in these words, “**I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me.**” David was looking forward to seeing his child in Heaven, and certainly, from that day on, Heaven was closer to David than ever before. Someone has written:

*“Even death has a wonderful mission
Though it robs us of those that we love;
He draws us (from our surroundings here)
To think of meeting above.
No matter how deep our loss is,
No matter how deep our despair,
Doesn't Heaven seem nearer and dearer,
To know that our loved ones are there?”*

God permits sorrow and suffering to turn our attention toward Heaven.

From the twelfth chapter of **Hebrews**, we learn that there are *three different attitudes* we can take toward trials and afflictions:

(1) We can despise them. “My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of Him.” Many people despise their troubles, and lash out violently against suffering, and blame others, and even blame God. This is a dangerous thing to do; it will make you cynical and hard; it will poison your soul; it can even wreck your life. Never despise your suffering.

(2) We can merely endure them. “If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons.” A great many people take this attitude towards sorrows. They just grit their teeth and make up their minds they’re going to bear it the best they can. They say, “We’ve all got our troubles, other people bear theirs, and I’m going to take mine like a man.” This may be better than despising suffering, but it’s not the best way.

(3) We can be exercised by them. “No chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous; nevertheless afterward, it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.” That is, you can profit by your sufferings. And instead of accusing God, you can search your heart, and as a result, you’ll grow in faith and patience, and you’ll manifest the fruits of righteousness in your life. No matter how severe the trial is, we should accept it with thanksgiving, and submit to it without a murmur, because we know that God has a good purpose.

The poet says:

*“The cloud you so much dread,
Is filled with mercy, and will break
With blessings on your head.
His purpose will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.”*

If we continue to maintain our faith in God, some day we will look into His face, and thank Him for every sorrow that drove its sharp edge through our souls. We will thank Him for every stroke of affliction, for every night of loneliness, for every day of pain—because, like Jesus, we will have learned obedience through suffering.