

I have a godly friend who has undergone incredible suffering -- physical, spiritual and emotional. This person's suffering has seemed to me to be beyond human endurance. It has been so intense at times, I've wondered how my friend could go on without collapsing under the burden of it all.

Recently, during a bout with even more suffering piled upon suffering, my friend came to me for prayer. I said, "I just can't understand it. You tell me you suffer for the cause of Christ -- that God is doing something good in you through all of this. But I see the pain on your face! I know you weep for hours, sometimes through the night. You seem pressed and harassed like no other person I know. How could God be in this? It seems so cruel!"

Just a few weeks ago my friend called my office, broken and weeping: "I can't take it anymore -- I feel death moving in on all sides! I'm at the end of my rope. It would be so wonderful if the Lord would call me home. No, I would never take my own life -- but death sounds so peaceful right now. Please, David -- do you have a word to console me?"

I was still troubled. So again I asked, "What is God trying to say in all this? I've never seen anybody suffer as you do!"

My friend grew silent -- then quietly suggested I read 2 Corinthians 1. "I think the Lord will explain to you what's going on in my life," my friend said.

That night at home, the Spirit spoke to me as I read this verse:

"...we were pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that we

The Suffering of Saints

despaired even of this life" (2.COR 1:8).

Paul was saying in this passage, "I'm going through something I don't understand at all. I'm being pressed beyond my endurance, beyond my ability to handle it, and I don't know why. I'm so low, I would welcome death!"

Now, Paul was as godly a servant of the Lord as ever walked on the face of the earth. He wanted nothing more in life than "to know Christ and Him crucified." He was entrusted with the mystery of the gospel, and he expounded it to the whole world. Yet Paul endured suffering that was so overwhelming and powerful, he was utterly at a loss. And there seemed to him no way of escape. He was so distraught, he thought death was at the door. He even said he was ready to lie down and die!

We do not know all the reasons behind Paul's sufferings. But it could have been a combination of several things:

He had been mistreated in Ephesus. And in the resulting riot, the people had tried to kill him.

He had reproved the church in Corinth soundly, and he didn't know whether he was still accepted there. Certain people accused him of being unstable, of

not knowing his own mind. (Paul twice had promised to come to them, but God had changed his mind.) He was accused of being dishonest, of misappropriating the offering money.

They also accused him of being a poor speaker, not highly recommended by his brethren. They said, "Your preaching is hard! Your words are not of the wisdom of this world." Paul acknowledged, "I don't preach with the wisdom of this world. I preach under the unction and power of the Holy Ghost!" But they didn't want that -- they wanted a smooth orator.

Finally, they even questioned Paul's sanity. They said he was of unsound mind!

The more Paul loved those who rejected him, the less he seemed loved by them. Beloved, that was true pain -- being rejected by the body of Christ, the very ones he'd helped and done so much for! How would you like to bear this from your brothers and sisters in Christ?

All of these things together probably brought Paul to the point of despairing of life.

Paul's Vocabulary Included a Lot About Suffering!

Consider Paul's list of troubles from his life:

"We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus..." (2.COR 4:8-10).

"Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep;" "In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren;" "In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches" (11:24-28).

Paul's life was absolutely full of suffering!

I ask you -- what is the root cause of your trouble, your suffering? As with Paul, it may be a combination of things:

Is it bodily suffering? Paul bore in his body the marks of his physical sufferings.

Is someone persecuting you? Perhaps a messenger of satan has been sent to buffet you.

Have you been rejected? Has your husband, wife, child or a close friend turned on you?

Are you going through fiery trials? Are you battling a stubborn temptation that won't let go? Having family trouble? Facing scary financial problems?

1. One of the Primary Purposes Behind All Sufferings of Saints Is To Qualify Us To Become Consolers of Other Sufferers!

Paul said, *"(The Lord) 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 of God"* (2.COR 1:4).

One of the neediest ministries in the church of Jesus Christ today is that of consolation -- comforting others in their trouble and affliction.

Many believers simply don't know where to turn in their hurt.

We do not need more Christian psychologists who use biblical words to disguise their psychological approaches. They apply the language of the Bible, yet they work from psychiatric premises. It doesn't matter how well-trained, "expert" or compassionate they are: Man's advice cannot alleviate a troubled soul!

When I'm really hurting, suffering deeply, I don't want to read some book that gives me ten steps on how to find victory. And I don't want to go to some big-name evangelist who'll "zap" me. None of these is the answer -- because none will reach the root of my suffering!

No -- I want to talk to some ordinary, unknown saint who has suffered heavily, and yet has come through it all praising God, comforted and full of faith!

I want someone who has been tested in the fires of affliction -- one who has known loneliness, sadness, sorrow, rejection, heartache. I want someone who has been to the point of giving up - - and yet has trusted God and come forth rejoicing, believing, stronger than ever. That person is a true expert!

You see, **it is suffering people who receive the consolations and comforts of the Lord. They know the sympathy of Jesus, because His voice speaks true comfort to them in their hour of darkness. These sufferers become rich in spiritual resources. They develop a confidence born out of having endured tribulations and testings. Best of all, God gives them an influence they could not have gotten in any other way!**

I think of Corrie Ten Boom, and the wonderful experience it was for the thousands of people who sat and listened to her talk about Jesus. Many pastors and leaders all over the United States were comforted and encouraged by this once-unknown woman -- because all of her suffering had produced a wealth of knowledge of the Lord.

She had a wealth of consolation and comfort from the Holy Spirit -- and she used that wealth as an influence for Jesus!

Paul was able to rejoice in all his tribulations because he knew his sufferings were for others' benefit. He saw his trials as a kind of schooling he was going through. He could say, "God has a purpose in this -- because He is training me! There will be people who are going to need my influence. They'll need my comfort and consolation, which I have received in my suffering!"

It is no wonder Paul referred to his heavenly Father as *"...the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort"* (2.COR 1:3). He had learned in his sufferings how to draw that consolation from the Lord!

When You Suffer in Your Body, You Become Very Patient With Others Who Are Suffering!

Suffering knocks all of the judging out of you! When you begin to suffer, and yet you dearly love the Lord and know you're not hiding any sin, you can no longer look at someone else's suffering and say, "I wonder what they're hiding? Why are they being judged?"

Years ago, my daughter Debbie attended what was called a "faith" church. It taught a health-and-prosperity gospel that left no room for suffering. In many such churches, if you suffer, you're thought either to have hidden sin in your life or to lack a certain quality or quantity of faith.

When Debbie got colon cancer, she was mocked, ridiculed and accused of not having faith. Eventually, she had to leave the church. It was cruel, awful! I was so angry, I felt like burning that church down!

Not long afterward, the church did shut its doors. Why? Many in the congregation had come under affliction themselves -- and they couldn't explain it. Finally, they got discouraged and gave up! Some of those members later apologized to Debbie and eventually had more sympathy for her. They realized that when they got sick or an accident occurred in their home, it

wasn't because of hidden sin or lack of faith.

Long before that, though, I had learned that **suffering can make you more understanding of the trials of others.** In my younger days as a pastor, a dear friend of mine lost a son and two grandsons in an airplane crash. I remember thinking, "What did he do, that God would allow such a tragedy to happen?"

I harbored those thoughts for about a year -- until yet another cancer struck in our home! I didn't wonder, "Lord, why did You do this?" -- because I knew our hearts were right before the Lord. And I wasn't judging myself as I'd judged my friend. Soon after that, I wrote my friend a letter of sympathy that came out of my experience.

People who have endured suffering -- who have come through it and proven God faithful - become strong, mellow, patient. They have the gentleness of Christ. I love to be around such people! They so encourage my spirit!

Beloved, that is what God has for you through your suffering!

You'll come through your trial and be of great help to others -- if you'll trust God through it! You'll see it happen on your job, in your family, in your church: People will be attracted to you, because they've seen what you've gone through -- and they've seen you gain victory and consolation through the power of God alone!

Yet there are many Christians who don't want to suffer. They live protected, untouched lives, and eventually they grow stagnant, self-centered and shallow. **Suffering works its lessons only in those who yield to it, who understand they're in school.**

There also are many believers who suffer but never learn anything from it. As a result, they never know God as their comforter or consoler. To hear them talk, you'd think God was hard, spiteful, uncaring. "Why me?" they ask. They doubt God's love, and they begin to turn away from Him. They moan, groan and murmur, and all their joy fades. Soon they grow

bitter and hard -- and eventually they backslide completely.

I have a pastor friend who at one time had a very successful ministry to troubled people. But today he is deep in sin, drug-addicted and totally backslidden. His wife left him, and he has taken up with a woman who also is on drugs.

When you ask him what happened, he blames it all on how others let him down: His wife left him. God didn't answer his prayers. Other ministers disappointed him. He says, "I really tried, but I just couldn't take it -- there were too many pressures. And there were so many hypocrites, phonies, Pharisees. I was misjudged, and I couldn't handle that. I can't trust people now!"

As you talk to him, you wonder if he ever knew Jesus at all. He has grown so hard -- and he grows harder with every passing year. He still suffers as much as before -- but his suffering has only hardened his heart!

The apostle Paul, even in the worst hour of his sufferings, blessed the name of the Lord. He knew the Father was full of mercy and was the Source of all his comfort. He didn't question God or become bitter -- he praised Him in the midst of it all!

The best teachers in any church are not the ones in the pulpit. Rather, they are sitting in the pews, right next to you -- people who have suffered and yet still worship the Lord. The language of those who learn through suffering is praise!

2. Another Purpose for the Suffering of Saints Is That We Should Never Again Trust in ourselves -- But Only in God!

Paul wrote: *"...that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead"* (2.COR 1:9).

He said, in essence, "The Lord brought me to the end of all human help, the brink of death. It was a place so hopeless, only the God of resurrection power could have rescued me!"

What a wonderful place to be -- at the end of your rope! I've always said, when you hit rock

bottom, you bump into God! Yet if you listen to most Christians in the midst of their suffering, you hear: "I'll make it somehow." "I'm hanging in there." "I just live one day at a time." "I'm trying not to let it get me down." "I'll survive -- I've always been a survivor."

No! It could become worse than you could ever imagine! God sometimes drives you to the very end of your rope, into deep suffering, so you'll lose all confidence in your ability to save yourself!

Since childhood we've been spoon-fed the concept of self-sufficiency: "Take it like a man!" "Men don't cry!" We have countless volumes on how to handle trouble, loneliness, sorrow, temptation. But it is all focused on our flesh -- our ability to extricate ourselves from our sufferings!

Beloved, how many times have you tried to work out all your troubles? How often have you been flooded with temptations that overwhelmed you? It all brought you down, and you said, "Oh God, You know I love You with all my heart. But I'm being sorely tempted! I hate this -- I despise it. Lord, I just don't understand."

Please don't misunderstand me: I believe God wants us to fight the good fight of faith. But the Lord has a way of allowing us to be "pressed out of measure" -- to suffer so powerfully that all other helps are in vain! **Nothing you try works. Nothing you've read seems to help. No counsel of others makes any sense.** Suddenly, you are forced into a crisis that obliterates all your trust in yourself. **You have no hope -- except to give up all human hope! You are forced to trust God** -- and you see that the only way out is to trust!

Paul is saying to us, loud and clear, "I had the sentence of death in me. I was tested beyond measure, at the end of all hope. And it was all so I would no longer trust in myself! I had to turn to God -- with faith that He alone could save me out of my sufferings!"

Paul was not just preaching theory -- and neither am I! I've been where Paul was -- in a crisis of suffering I couldn't escape, a humanly impossible situation. I

know what it is to reach the end of all hope, and not be able to understand why I'm being tried. I've been in places where I had no one to turn to for understanding, no resources to get me through.

Over the years I've carried huge financial burdens numbering in the millions. I've known what it is to have a wife who's close to death with cancer, and a daughter who's close to death with cancer -- and then another daughter with cancer! During the same time Gwen and Bonnie were battling death, I wrote a book about coming judgment -- and I received literally hundreds of letters of rebuke calling me a false prophet!

I turned to the Lord in the midst of all this and said, "Lord, all I've wanted is to serve You with all my heart." His answer to me? A physical affliction on top of it all!

Believe me, that is when you start the serious introspection: "Lord, what did I do wrong? Why are You allowing me to go through all of this?"

In the end, you come to the place where you give up trying to deliver yourself!

You give up condemning yourself, give up trying to understand, give up trying to do things in your own power. Instead, you turn to the Lord and cry out, "Oh Father, I'm in over my head! All my striving has gotten me nowhere. But I know You have all the power I need! You raised the dead -- and You can deliver me. I'll trust You from now on!"

Scripture says: *"Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy"* (. PET 4:12-13).

Jesus was tempted by the devil also -- and it was a cause of great suffering to Him! Like our Master, we all will face various temptations, some of them fiery and fierce. But beloved, I have learned a precious lesson through all of my trials: I found the way of escape!

"There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it" (1.COR 10:13).

What is this way of escape? It is coming to the end of your own strength and turning absolutely to God! It is saying, as Paul did, "I do not trust in myself anymore!"

The way of escape is simple, childlike faith in God. It is resigning yourself and saying, "God, I put everything on You. I'm not going to try to figure it all out!" It is trusting Him totally, to see you through it all -- and to end your suffering in His time and in His way!

3. Finally, God Intended That When He Delivers Us From Suffering, We Never Again Doubt His Power To Deliver Us in Every Present and Future Trial!

"Who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver: in whom we trust that he will yet deliver us" (2.COR 1:10).

Paul is speaking of God's delivering power -- past, present and future! He is saying, "God has delivered us in the past, He is delivering us now, and He will deliver us in every future trouble and trial. We don't have to fear anything that comes our way -- because we know God is going to deliver us!

Yet, like the children of Israel, we forget the past deliverances of the Lord. And, oh, the deliverances God gave them!

"He clave the rocks in the wilderness, and gave them drink as out of the great depths. He brought streams also out of the rock, and caused waters to run down like rivers. And they sinned yet more against him by provoking the most High in the wilderness," *"And they tempted God in their heart by asking meat for their lust. Yea, they spake against God; they said, Can God furnish a table in the wilderness? Behold, he smote the rock, that the waters gushed out, and the streams overflowed; can he give*

bread also? can he provide flesh for his people?" (PSA 78:15-20).

Beloved, that is exactly what happens with us! We say, "Sure, I was in a tight place, and God delivered me. But this is different. How could He possibly do it now?"

God wants you to build your faith on all His past deliverances!

He wants you to come to such a place in your faith that you trust Him in every crisis, every temptation -- and know you can face the future without fear! He wants you to be able to say, **"My God delivered me in the past! He is delivering me right now out of my present trouble. And He will keep delivering Me until He comes back for me -- no matter what I have to endure!"**

King Jehoshaphat came through a great time of testing fully trusting in God. The combined armies of Moab and Ammon had come against him to do battle:

"And Jehoshaphat feared, and set himself to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah...to ask help of the Lord" (2.CHR 20:3-4).

These armies represent the power of satan coming against the saints of God! So where did Jehoshaphat go for help?

"Jehoshaphat...set himself to seek the Lord... to ask help of the Lord...."

He went to the Lord in prayer! And that's where deliverance begins for us as well -- on our knees!

Listen to Jehoshaphat's prayer: *"...O Lord God of our fathers, art not thou God in heaven? and rulest not thou over all the kingdoms of the heathen? and in thine hand is there not power and might, so that none is able to withstand thee?"* (verse 6)

He was saying, "Lord, aren't You still God? Who is able to stand against You? Is there any demon, any temptation able to withstand You? You have all the might and power we need!"

"...we have no might against this great company that cometh against us; neither know we what to do: but our eyes are upon thee" (verse 12).

The enemy was coming in like a flood. There was suffering and trouble on all sides. And Jehoshaphat was saying, "We don't know what to do -- we're no match for them!"

Then the Spirit of God came upon the prophet Jahaziel, and he said: *"...Be not afraid nor dismayed by reason of this great multitude; for the*

battle is not yours, but God's.... Ye shall not need to fight in this battle: set yourselves, stand ye still, and see the salvation of the Lord with you...fear not, nor be dismayed...for the Lord will be with you" (verses 15-17).

Right now there are armies of demonic seductions and temptations coming against you -- and you have no might or power to fight. You're no match for the devil, and you don't know what to do.

Dear saint, do what Jehoshaphat did: Get your eyes on the Lord! Turn to Him and say, "Lord, my eyes are on You!" The battle is not yours. You must resign from the fight!

You've got to call on the Lord and trust Him. Turn to Him now, and find Him faithful to deliver.

Whatever your battle may be -- it is His! Amen!

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