

WHY MUST CHRISTIANS SUFFER?

Psalm 42

INTRO: Last week I thought that I should maybe have changed subjects, but I was too late by the time I thought of it. And this week when we got the February issue of the Herald of His Coming, their subject matter was sorrows, trials, and the Holy Spirit as our Comforter and God's great efforts to produce brokenness in us. I took this as a cue to speak on that which I thought I should have spoken on last Sunday. So I bring before us this morning, a subject of great importance, "Why must Christians suffer?"

In life, one of the great mysteries we will never fully understand, or likely appreciate, is the problem of the trials of life. Eliphaz the Temanite said in the book of Job, "...man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward" (5:7). I am not good at the Hebrew of the OT, but I understand that a literal reading for sparks is, 'sons of the flame.' Sparks are born out of the flame. As the flames bring forth sparks that fly upward, so man brings forth children that rise to trouble.

How did all of this start? Well, it started in the Garden of Eden. After Adam and Eve had sinned, God told Eve she would bear children in sorrow and in pain. To the man He said, "Cursed is the ground for your sake." God told the man that he would toil with thorns and thistles all the days of his life. In the past weeks many of us have gone through trials. Some have borne great sorrow.

Fred Jarvis, one of the writers in the Herald of His Coming this month wrote an article, "When Sorrow Strikes." He started like this, "It was one of the blackest and most tragic days of my life. I was in Guatemala, one of our mission fields, when I received an urgent message to call my wife at our mission compound on the Texas-Mexican border. I could not help but wonder what could be the problem that merited this emergency call. Never will I forget the shocking words my wife sobbed out to me over the phone: 'Honey, Paul has been killed in a motor cycle accident.' God gave me grace not to weep. I did not want to add more to the flow of my dear wife's tears at the sudden death of our son. Our 26-year-old Paul was engaged to be married. I had expected to marry him. About the same time, my brother Henry Jarvis who has served with us as a missionary for many years, was rushed to a hospital stricken with cancer. A few

days later our problems multiplied when my wife's wallet was stolen with considerable cash and irreplaceable pictures of our deceased son."

Now stories like that could be repeated, story on end, and many, many much, much worse. And there we stand before the mystery of suffering, like Job, with our hand over our mouth. Somehow I wish I could erase the pain in my own life over the past few months, and the pain some of you are carrying.

Now, let me just say before we get going, that there are times when we may suffer for wrongdoing. That is not our subject this morning. When we suffer for wrongdoing, we need to take care of the wrong. Our subject this morning is the sufferings of this life that we go through as Christians, and we are asking, "Why Must Christians Suffer?"

I. TO PRODUCE SOFT SOIL

Well, I am glad to say that it is not that we are left with any answers to our question. We have been going through the beatitudes and the very first beatitude is, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." This usually does not come but by troubles. So let us begin with this point that one of the Lord's main purposes in allowing all kinds of trouble into our lives is to produce soft soil or hearts, that which picture being poor in spirit.

One of man's greatest battles is with pride. Pride is such a chameleon that we often fail to recognize it in ourselves. The self-life, selfishness is so subtle that we many times fail to recognize it. And then God has to allow trouble into our lives in order that we might get to see ourselves.

The prophet Hosea said in 10:12, "Sow for yourselves righteousness; Reap in mercy; Break up your fallow ground, For it is time to seek the LORD, Till He comes and rains righteousness on you." When Hosea speaks of breaking up the fallow ground, he is talking about hardened hearts that need softening. One of God's most effective ways of breaking up our hard hearts is by trials.

One of the major tasks God has with sinful man is to cause him to be humble. 1 Peter 5:6-7 says, "Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time..." It is an amazing thing that to become

humble is our own business. And that is the problem, we ourselves, are our own greatest enemies. Self, the real me, is why I am selfish and proud. And one of God's greatest tools to humble man is trouble and trials.

One of the articles in the paper I mentioned earlier had a brief message by Charles H. MacKintosh titled, "God will have broken material." The article began like this: "There is no more fruitful field of study than that which is opened before us in the history of God's dealing with souls. It is full of interest and abounds in instruction and profit. One grand object in those dealings is to produce real brokenness and humility—to strip us of all false righteousness, empty us of all self-confidence, and teach us to lean wholly upon Christ."

For us to become saved requires first of all a brokenness. We must be stripped of any false notions that we are something. This stripping is a very painful thing. All self-confidence must be stripped away. We must be reduced to see ourselves as nothing. Dr. J. Otis Yoder used to say that God creates out of nothing. So until we are reduced to nothing, He cannot make anything out of us.

Mackintosh goes on like this, "All have to pass through what may be called the process of stripping and emptying. With some, this process precedes conversion, or the new birth—with others it follows. Many are brought to Christ through the deep plowings and painful exercises of heart and conscience—exercises extending over years, often over the whole lifetime. Others, on the contrary, are brought with comparatively little exercise of soul. They lay hold, speedily, of the glad tidings of forgiveness of sins through the atoning death of Christ and are made happy at once. But the stripping and emptying come afterward, and, in many cases cause the soul to totter on its foundation and almost to doubt its conversion."

Then he says, "This is very painful but very needful. The fact is, self must be learnt and judged sooner or later. If it be not learnt in communion with God, it must be learnt by bitter experiences in failures and falls. 'No flesh shall glory in His presence.'"

So, what he is saying is that some get saved without having passed through much sorrow or difficulties. But

they must learn brokenness, and for them it will come after they are saved. And for such people, they may come to question their salvation because of these trials. But others go through years and years of life's trials, and get saved in the end. But no matter at which end one gets saved, or if it be in the middle, all have to become broken.

What we are talking about surely will remind us of the first beatitude, blessed are the poor in spirit. Mackintosh says, "One special want of the present moment is brokenness of spirit. Nine-tenths of our trouble and difficulty may be traced to this want."

Now we might weigh our trials from 1-10, 10 being the most difficult. And let me give a bit of advice here from my own experience. If the trial is very severe, say a big loss of some kind, maybe even some great tragedy; then there will set in a period of pain. The pain may be so great that you go numb and things do not even register properly. And you may enter something that is like grieving.

Maybe you cannot sleep right or eat right, and life is just very painful. You just go through the motions of life from day to day. Do not expect you should just be able to sleep like you usually did, or that you should be able to hand it over to God, and your body would not continue to suffer. Give yourself time. It feels like life will never be normal again and you may want to despair. There, in the midst of that pain, surrender to God and let Him do His work. Do not rush Him. Do not become bitter. Do not give into despair. Trust against all your feelings.

Go with me to Psalm 42 which was read for us earlier. Now note verses 5 and 11(read). The Psalmist is talking to himself. He remembers the times when he rejoiced and walked with others in peace and joy. But now he is in the depths of sorrow. He says to his soul, "Soul, why are you cast down, why are you disquieted in me?" And then he instructs himself like this, "Hope in God..." Hope always has in mind a better day ahead. If there is not hope, there is no looking for a better day ahead. And here is what he is reminding himself of, "For I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance." So he is reminding himself that it won't always be like this.

So, what we have here is the fact that between times of great trial and major difficulties, and victory, there is the requirement of time. And in that time we must have hope. If we don't, we will likely become bitter. But if we hope in God for a better day, we can come through to victory. And it seems to me that for God to accomplish some things in us, the time between when we are crushed until we come to victory, might have to be long in order for it to accomplish that which God has in mind.

1 Peter 5:6-7, which we read earlier said, "Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time..." With the words, "in due time" we once more see that time is involved. What is your present test? Your present trial? Do you say you don't have a present trial? Then be reminded that you have much to praise God for. But if you have a present trial, does Peter have a word of advice in the passage we read? He does. He goes on like this, "casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you."

Many times it is a major task to cast our burdens on Him. We give them to Him and then we have them back again, and then we give them to Him again and so it goes. But the ultimate victory will come if we give them to Him.

So, we give as the first reason for sufferings, that God wants us to become soft. He wants us to be broken. And to do that, we have to be crushed.

II. TO CAUSE US TO BE FRUITFUL

There is another reason why we must suffer. This past week one evening when we had just gone to bed, my wife said, "I read something interesting this morning." She is saying things like that more and more and she has given me some very good insights, so I was listening. She had been reading in John 15. Turn to it (read 1-2).

In this account Jesus likened Himself to a vine. No doubt, the grape vine is in view, as grapes were a special crop in Israel. And Jesus said He was the true vine, but His Father, that is God Almighty, is the vinedresser. Vine dressing was a demanding task. Albert Barnes gives three great tasks of the vinedresser. He had to nurture, trim and defend the vines. One of the big jobs was trimming.

Jesus said here that every branch in Him that does not bear fruit God removes. But those branches that bear fruit He prunes, and here is our lesson. Pruning is painful to the branch. But those who know about pruning also know that if you do not prune, the plant will not produce the way it should.

Now, no doubt we think that if we were left alone and did not constantly experience difficulties, we would be much better off spiritually and we would be much better able to produce. But Jesus said He is the true vine, and without doubt, God is a true vinedresser. Ever since the fall of man, God has had to prune His people in order to bring forth fruit. It seems to me that many times we do not even recognize the fruit that is brought about by the Lord's pruning, but it is there.

I hear this statement from time to time when people are experiencing difficulties: I just didn't need that! But if God allowed it, we needed it! When God went to work on a problem in Job He discussed Job with none other than the devil himself. He said to the devil, "Have you considered My servant Job? Have you seen how upright he is? Have you seen how he fears God and shuns evil?" And Satan said something like this, "Have I considered him? What a question. But I'll tell you something God, he does not fear You for nothing. You have hedged him in and I can't get at him. But let me at him and he will curse You to Your face!"

And God said, "So, that is what you believe? Well, I'll tell you what. You can have at him. But, there is one thing I will not allow. You cannot lay a hand on him." Well, if you read the story, you will find the darkness Job went through. You see, he had no idea about Satan and God's discussion. He had to trust God by faith. He had to trust God with what he had learned about God. But notice who was in control over how much suffering Job was to experience. God had his limits. God will not allow more than He knows is good for us. He said to Satan, "You can't touch him."

Now, Job was a rich and fruitful man. But when God had pruned him, he was even more fruitful. Before Job suffered he had seven sons and three daughters and his possessions were seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five

hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred female donkeys, and a very large household. So Job 1 says that this man was the greatest of all the people of the East.

In the end, he once more had seven sons and three daughters. But instead of seven thousand sheep he had fourteen thousand. Instead of three thousand camels he had six thousand. Instead of five hundred yoke of oxen he had a thousand. And instead of five hundred female donkeys, he had a thousand. Now Job was a very generous man to others before he was afflicted, and no doubt he became even more helpful to others afterward.

Now let me put in a little caution here. I am not promoting a prosperity gospel. How God deals with those who are faithful to Him in trials and testings is entirely up to Him. John the Baptist was a man who sacrificed a normal life of having possessions and a wife and children, to study the Word of God and become the forerunner of Jesus Christ. When he came into his ministry, he ministered so successfully that he had accomplished the task God set out for him, in my estimation, in a few months of time.

He was a bold man and one day he was face to face with Herod. Now Herod had married Herodius, his brother Philip's wife and John reproved him. But Luke says that John did not only reprove Herod for the woman he had married, but for all the evils he had done! Wow! What a daring man! But it was costly. Herod imprisoned John. Can you imagine God allowing the forerunner of His Son to be imprisoned? And if you study John, you will find he went through a very difficult time in prison, so much so that he even began to doubt if Jesus was the Christ!

But did God restore him and greatly bless him afterward? No, it was not long later he was beheaded. His life work was over. So Peter writes in 1 Peter 4:19, "Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator."

So, the second reason we have here why God allows suffering is to cause us to become fruitful.

III. TO PRODUCE GOLD FOR GOD

But there is another reason God allows us to suffer. So, we might agree this morning and say, "Yes, I know that life is filled with trials and I know we are to learn to trust God; but what is the value of all this?" One of our deacons read Psalm 8 for us recently. The Psalmist said, "When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, The moon and the stars, which You have ordained, what is man that You are mindful of him, And the son of man that You visit him? (3-4)."

When you look at that vast expanse at night and you see the stars and the planets, and then when you learn to know how vast that universe is and how huge some of those stars are and how great the distances involved are, one wants to say, "What am I, that You are mindful of me?" But when you study the Scriptures and begin to realize a little of what battle we are in, where it is fought, and what God gets out of one man that trusts Him; that question begins to find answers.

Let me say this to you this morning, no matter who you are, no matter how young or how old you are; no matter if you are boy or girl, man or woman; no matter how much you possess or how little; if you have put your faith in God Almighty you are of infinite value to God! He will do absolutely anything, He will go to any length to conform you to the image of Christ. He will love you so much that He will allow some very, very difficult troubles to come your way in order to make something very special for Himself out of you.

Job was such a special man to God. And one day God found a spiritual tumor in Job, and it was a tumor of the very worst kind; spiritual pride. And amazingly, God allowed Satan to have access to Job. All he limited Satan to is that he could not take his life. And Satan took all he could, and Job entered the darkest night he had ever known.

Turn to Job 23 (read 8-9). Job is saying, "I am in trouble. I have looked for God and I cannot find Him. I go forward and He is not there, so I go back, but I don't find Him there either. I can't find Him on the left or on the right and I am in a dark, dark night." Many years ago I heard a man speak on the book of Job. He asked these questions: 1 Will a man trust God when he is immersed in

troubles of all kinds? 2 Will a man trust God when his friends turn against him? 3 Will a man trust God when God says nothing. Job found himself utterly forsaken, by God and by man. He seemed to be all alone.

But Job had an understanding of the character of God and He still trusted. Maybe he felt like the man in the NT who said to Jesus, "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief." But in 23:10 Job said these words, "But He knows the way that I take; When He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold." He was confident that if he would hang on and put his trust in God, in the end something of great value would come out of all this.

What are your present trials? Have you resolved to trust where you cannot trace, as LEM would say? Job said in verses 11-12, "My foot has held fast to His steps; I have kept His way and not turned aside. I have not departed from the commandment of His lips; I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food."

Now let me ask you this question: If Job comes forth as gold at the end, who gets the benefit of that gold? Gold has always been and still is today, a commodity of those things that are of highest value. But who gets the value of a person who trusts God no matter how dark life gets?

I want to propose to you that when one person learns to trust God and commit himself fully to God though he cannot see what is happening behind the scenes; those huge stars in the universe dim in value to God in comparison! When God finds a man who trusts him in the midst of life's storms, He has hit, what may be called, pay dirt! Made of the dust of the ground, but tremendously valuable.

One of the articles in the Herald of His Coming said, "But, beloved reader, is there not something profoundly interesting in the fact that God can use Satan as an instrument in the discipline of His people?" You see, the devil may get a hold of some circumstances and some people and seek to destroy us, but if we will commit ourselves to God like Job did, then we and God are the victors in the end.

Go to 1 Peter 1. I have spoken to you several times from these verses but let us read verses 3-9 (read). Verse 6 speaks of the trials we have been talking about. Verse 7

gives us a reason for these trials. It is, 'That the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes...' And I have asked, "To whom is genuineness of faith so valuable?" And I believe the answer is that it is so valuable to God Almighty Himself. The genuineness of our faith is the commodity of highest value to God Almighty. That is why God is mindful of man!

If you have read stories of gold rushes, you will know what man will go through to find gold. Man will go through almost any kind of trials and difficulties. God will also go through a great deal of trouble to find gold. And He will put us in the furnace of affliction in order to produce good quality gold.

Go to Philippians 3. In verses 3-6 Paul lists the advantages he had as a Jew before he was saved. Then in verse 7 he says he counts all things loss for Christ. Now look at verses 8-11 (read). He counted all those advantages he had as rubbish in order that he might gain Christ. He wanted to be found, not having the righteousness of the law. The righteousness of the law is righteousness lived to gain eternal life. It is righteousness out of obligation. He wanted that kind of righteousness that was generated by faith in Christ. And He wanted this righteousness in order that He might know Christ and the power of His resurrection. Now that is understandable, but then he says, "and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death." Wow! Do we give up everything held dear by man in order to know the fellowship of the sufferings of Christ? Do we give up all of what man considers dear so that we might be conformed to His death?

But, not only is the trial of our faith of value to God. It has infinite value for us as well. 1 Peter 1, where we were earlier said, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." And the lively hope is that we have been begotten again, "To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you" (3-4).

III. TO PRODUCE A PURE PEOPLE FOR HIMSELF

Let me briefly mention one more purpose of suffering. It is that God might produce a pure people for Himself. Go to Titus 2 (read 11-14). The grace of God teaches us to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts. It teaches us that we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present age and to look for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. And of Christ it says that He gave Himself for us that He might redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself His own special people, people who are zealous to do good works.

God wants a people who live right. He wants them free from every lawless deed. He wants them pure. Earlier I mentioned that through trials, gold is produced for God. This gold represents our faith. But our faith has to be purified. So we need to see how gold is purified. Those who purify gold do so by fire. The gold is placed in a container called a crucible. Here it is heated until the gold turns into liquid. When it turns to liquid, the impurities called dross rise to the top and the dross is skimmed off. This is done until the goldsmith can look into the crucible and see himself as in a mirror in the liquid gold. Once that happens, the gold is pure.

And how does God purify our faith? By trials. These trials, like the fire in purifying gold, cause the dross to rise to the top; so cause sin and any kind of impurities in our faith to rise to the top. Once they are on top, we can then for the first time see them, and thus skim them off by repenting. And sometimes the goldsmith had to turn up the heat or add certain things to the crucible in order to bring all the dross out of the gold. Just so, faith is purified by trials, and God wants a pure people for Himself. And sometimes the Lord has to add certain powerful things into our life of trials in order to bring certain stubborn substances out of our faith. And then, finally, when the Lord looks at us and He can see Himself in us, then our faith has been purified!

And it may be that sometimes there may be parts in us where He can see Himself, but other parts where the image is not real clear yet. And the Lord, like a good goldsmith, will go to any length to make us all the way pure.

CONCL. So, let us conclude. Why does the Christian suffer trials in this life? Well, we have explored a few reasons. First, He wants to produce soft soil. He wants us to become humble. Second, the trials of life, when responded to in the right way will make us fruitful for the Lord's kingdom. Third, the Lord uses trials and difficulties to produce a pure people for Himself. And last, out of those who are conformed to the image of Christ, those who learn to trust Him, He gets something very valuable for Himself. I do not find anything God seeks so diligently as pure, genuine faith. And one of the required ingredients to produce that is trials.

It is good for us to be reminded of the purpose of trials in life from time to time. This reminder can strengthen us to go on and grow in grace and faith.