

April 25, 2010

Living in the Light of Christ's Return

Why God Ordains Suffering for His Children

1 Thessalonians 3:1 – 8

Good theology is essential to walking through suffering well. It will help us endure the unendurable with hope and with joy. We know biblically, that weeping may last for the night but joy comes in the morning, but we cannot anticipate just how long the night can be, nor how plentiful the tears. And this is where solid, God-centered, Christ-exalting theology comes in. **Good theology** will not take the pain out of suffering, but it will inject your soul with the hope that God is working even all the hurt and evil for good. If you do not know that – if you do not really receive and embrace the truth that God is sovereign over all things in your life, over all the good things and all the bad, then suffering can make shipwreck of your faith.

Many Christians may agree that God **has** the power and right to govern all things, but they hesitate to say that He in fact **does** govern all things for His own wise and holy purposes. They are more prone to say that God did not ordain this evil, this affliction, this suffering, but that He can take the affliction that I am suffering and turn it all to good. But as we saw last week, God is fully in control of both ends of the spectrum. He is supreme and sovereign over all suffering, all affliction, all calamity, all evil – just as He is sovereign over all that is good and right and lovely. **That means that He ordains days of prosperity as well as days of adversity.** And He has ordained every good thing and every bad thing that comes our way for our good and His glory. It is the absolute sovereignty of a loving and gracious God that puts backbone in our faith when we are pressured or crushed or squeezed by adverse circumstances.

David Brainerd, missionary to the Indians in the eighteenth century, experienced what he called a 'sweet resignation' to the hand of God in his suffering with sickness and danger, depression and loneliness, and the rigors of an outdoor life in his ministry. In his diary on March 10, 1744 he wrote: *'My soul was sweetly resigned to God's disposal of me in every regard; and I saw there had nothing happened to me but what was best for me.'*

The afflictions that John Bunyan suffered, enduring twelve long years in prison, separation from his family and flock, living nearly always in the real possibility of dying for his faith, produced a book that has ministered to literally millions of Christians through the years, and has never gone out of print since it was first published, *A Pilgrims Progress*, said this about suffering: *'It is not what enemies will, nor what they are resolved upon, but what God will, and what God appoints, that shall be done...And as no enemy can bring suffering upon a man when the will of God is otherwise, so no man can save himself out of their hands when God will deliver him up for His glory...We shall or shall not suffer, even as it pleaseth Him...God has appointed who shall suffer. Suffering comes not by chance or by the will of man, but by the will and appointment of God.'*

Let this truth be the foundation of your hope and your joy, in days of prosperity and in days of adversity. Because God has designed good in all that He has ordained for you, and in our prosperity and in our adversity His purposes will be worked out. Most of us have no trouble with prosperous and happy days – it is in the days of affliction that our faith may waver. So this morning I want to give you some solid, word-of-God reasons that God ordains suffering in the lives of His children.

Let me first preface this with the assurance of Scripture that **God indeed intends that affliction teach us more about who God is and bring us closer to Him**, because there are those voices that claim that affliction, suffering, calamity, evil, comes only from the devil and has nothing to do with God or His purpose. In fact I heard one prominent preacher say recently that *'It is not normal Christianity to think that God would allow a tragedy to happen, sickness in our body, the loss of a loved one to teach us a lesson – it is not God.'* First of all, God doesn't **allow** anything – He **ordains** everything. Secondly, we miss much of what God would intend if we focus only on us and how tragedy, sickness and loss relate only to me. But most important, this preacher would do well to read passages like Isaiah 30 where it says: *And though the Lord give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide Himself anymore, but your eyes shall see your Teacher.* Isaiah 30:20 The **Lord** gives the bread of adversity and the water of affliction – and He intends that through those we would see Him and know Him and learn from Him – the Teacher.

He could also turn to Hosea 2: *Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. And there I will give her her vineyards and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.*

Hosea 2:14-15 Here the Lord was speaking about His people, Israel, who had been rebellious and sinful and faithless toward the Lord. His plan however was to bring her into the wilderness, a desolate barren place and there He would speak to her. They would hear the voice of God in that place, and there, in a barren place, cause life to spring up. And then He says, that that wilderness – the valley of Achor – will actually be a door of hope for them. The word **Achor** means **trouble** – it is the valley of trouble. And God is saying that our valleys of trouble are designed to work hope in us, not despair. And that can only happen if we understand that God ordains suffering in the lives of His children.

He could also turn to the book of Job: *He delivers the afflicted in their affliction, And opens their ear in time of oppression.* Job 36:15 Notice that God delivers those whom He afflicts in their affliction – and through that, opens their ears to hear Him. It was C.S. Lewis who said: **God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts to us in our pain; it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world**. C.S. Lewis The word translated **delivers** - *He delivers the afflicted* – also has the meaning of '**equipping or arming for war**'. **That is, the affliction that God ordains for us works to equip us or arm us for the conflict.** So how does affliction equip us in the conflict? How is the valley of trouble a door of hope for us? What are we to learn through what God lovingly ordains that we suffer?

Affliction teaches us to rely on God and not ourselves

For we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. 2 Corinthians 1:8-9 God ordains suffering so that all our props are knocked out from underneath us so that we have no choice but to rely on God. He uses suffering to reduce us to Himself. We tend to rely on what we can do and God has to lure us into the wilderness and the valley of trouble to teach us that He is enough. That is, if you lost everything else – home, family, job, security – God Himself would be enough for you.

Geoffrey Bull was a missionary to Tibet who was caught by the invasion of the Red Chinese Army as it conquered that country and imprisoned in China for three years – much of the time in solitary confinement. And the question that occupied his mind was this: Is God enough? Is He enough even though I'm alone – no one to talk to, even though I'm stuck in a dismal, dirt floored prison, even though I have nothing but the rags on my back? Is God enough? And he found out that God indeed was enough. Strangely, it is not in days filled with comfort and ease, when the sun is shining and everything seems to be going well that we enjoy the sweetest communion with God and the deepest joys of knowing Him. It is rather in those times of suffering and loss, when there is no fruit on the vine and no cattle in the stalls that Christ is experienced as our greatest treasure. We have the mistaken notion that suffering should be temporary, justified, and readily applicable to life. When in reality it is suffering that frees us from the deadly delights of sin and the powerful lure of worldly affections and leaves us with no recourse but Christ Himself.

Affliction adds weight to our souls

For this light momentary affliction is [producing] for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. 2 Corinthians 4:17-18 Notice the words here: light, momentary, affliction – eternal, weight, glory. Paul purposefully puts these in juxtaposition so that we would get the impact of them. Compared to the eternal weight of glory to come – our affliction here is easy to bear and just for an instant. And what Paul is saying is that these afflictions that are light and temporary, produce a weight of glory that is enduring.

When I was in the Ukraine in 1996 for the first Pan-Russian Prison Conference, a conference for those Christian workers who boldly served Christ in prisons across the former Soviet Union – I was privileged to hear some speakers who not only were taking the gospel to those in prison, but many who had been prisoners themselves for many years. And the sense I had as I heard these men and women speak, and spoke to some of them myself, was a sense of gravitas – weightiness. It was a sense of a weight of glory that emanated from their souls. These were not casual Christians – some had been torn from family, friends and church for twenty years or more – some had been beaten senseless over and over – all of them suffered for their faith and some weight had been deposited into their souls. You just got the impression that these would be men and women you would want by your side in a fight.

Affliction disciplines us to holiness

For the Lord disciplines the one He loves, and chastises every son whom He receives...For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness. Hebrews 12:6,10 The way the Lord disciplines His children is through suffering. Why should we find that strange since that is how we discipline our own children? The Scripture says that even Christ, *Although He was a Son, He learned obedience through what He suffered.* Hebrews 5:8 Which is not to say that Jesus went from disobedience to obedience – He never sinned – but rather that the way in which He demonstrated deeper and deeper obedience was through suffering. But for us there is the added need of purifying our souls of self-reliance and attachment to the world as well as deeper and deeper obedience to God.

Affliction fills up the sufferings of Christ

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of His body, that is, the church, Colossians 1:24 First of all you need to understand that Paul is not saying that there was something deficient in what Jesus went through on the cross and has to somehow be made up through our suffering. What is lacking in Christ's afflictions has nothing to do with some kind of limitations on the efficacy of the work of Christ in salvation. That is to say, there was nothing deficient in the sacrifice of Jesus for us. The death of Christ for our redemption was complete and full – a once-for-all, never-to-be repeated redemptive work and we could never add anything to its worth. ***Our suffering is not a repetition of Calvary – rather it is an extension of Calvary.***

The thing that is lacking is **the proclamation of His afflictions for our sakes to all peoples.** The message of the gospel – the suffering and death and resurrection of Jesus – is not yet seen and known to all peoples everywhere – therefore the lack. The work of the cross is complete and lacks nothing but the personal presentation of the message to the nations of the world. And the means God has chosen to do this is by calling you and I to present the afflictions of Christ and the work of the cross to those in the farthest corners of the world and to those as near as next door and to all the ones in between who do not know the infinite value of Christ.

It is a proclamation of His afflictions through our afflictions. Paul says, *in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions.* In other words he saw in his real, in-the-flesh suffering for the sake of the gospel, a proclamation of the afflictions of Christ. I think this means that God intends that the afflictions of Christ are proclaimed to the world and are **seen most clearly in the afflictions we endure and the way in which we endure them.** His afflictions are filled up in ours because in our afflictions, the world sees His sacrifice for them. If we proclaim the cross of Christ, and yet it is not seen in our lives – how can that impact those we are trying to reach? I believe that we make the afflictions of Christ real to people when they see the mark of the cross on our lives. They see that we live a life denying our impulse to pad our nest, to maximize our comfort and minimize our risk. They see that we are not bent out of shape by adverse circumstances – they see that our joy is not dependent upon external devices – they watch as we sacrifice our money and our time for the sake of the gospel. **And they begin to see the the infinite worth of the afflictions of Christ for their redemption.**

This is what Paul says to Timothy: *Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound! Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.* 2 Timothy 2:8-10

Affliction is one of the means through which the kingdom of God advances

But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Luke 21:12-13 When Jesus was telling His disciples what the future held for them, He offers a strange sort of means through which the gospel would be spread – 'You are going to be beaten and persecuted and thrown into prison – and some of you will be brought up on charges before kings and governors and **that's** your opportunity to preach the gospel'. If we were God we would probably not have set it up like this. That sort of means seems at the best, counter-productive and and the worst, suicidal. But God doesn't work things like we think He ought to. There are those whom God is wanting to save that would hear the gospel in no other context. And so He appoints affliction for some to be thrown into prison and delivered up to the governing authorities so that they would have opportunity to preach. To those who do not know God, that often seems like a setback – not an advance.

But God often uses what looks like setbacks to advance His kingdom cause as in Acts: *And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.* Acts 8:1 The church in Jerusalem was growing, multitudes were coming to Christ according to Acts chapter 5, and in chapter 6 it says: *The word of God kept on spreading ; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.* Acts 6:7 Things were going great! And then Stephen stuck his foot in it and got brought up on charges of blasphemy to the Sanhedrin and got to preach the gospel and was killed for his efforts.

Had we been there, we probably would have complained to God about the waste of a talented, charismatic young preacher. But this was the essence of Stephen's life – be born, grow up, come to Christ, make the Pharisees mad by preaching the gospel and get killed by stoning. But you know what that did? His stoning incited a general persecution of the Christian community that resulted in the evangelization of the world! Here it says that these Jerusalem Christians were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria and then in chapter 11 we read: *Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews.* Acts 11:19

Before the Chinese Communists came to power in 1949, there were an estimated seven million Christians in China, after nearly 200 years of missionary work. But then the Bamboo Curtain came down over that country, the missionaries were expelled and the Christians were thrown into prison, work camps, and re-education centers by the hundreds of thousands. Many thousands were taken out and executed – Christianity was made illegal – and many thought the church in China would disappear. But they forgot that it is God's church and He was at work in China even though western missionaries weren't. By the time the curtain lifted after the Cultural Revolution in the 1960's and 70's, the world was astounded to learn that instead seven million Christians there were seventy million, and the number continues to climb. Best estimates are around one hundred and thirty million Chinese Christians.

Pastor Hristo Kulichev, a Bulgarian Pastor went to prison in 1985 for preaching the gospel in his church where the State had appointed another pastor. When he got out he said, *'...it turned out that we had a more fruitful ministry there than we could have expected in church. God was better served by our presence in prison than if we had been free.'* Affliction is one of the means through which God's kingdom advances.

Affliction magnifies the greatness of God through joy

"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. Matthew 5:11-12 Our joy in the midst of affliction and suffering serves to magnify the God who ordains that very suffering. It is not a joy that we must work up – otherwise it would not magnify Him but us. But there is a joy that springs from hearts that have been calmed and assured that this too is from our loving Lord's sovereign hands that is real and full and unforced. Joni Eareckson Tada, a paraplegic who suffers pain every day, not to mention the incredible inconvenience of having arms and legs that do not work, spoke at the Desiring God National Conference in 2005 and said this about affliction: *It is when your soul has been blasted bare, when you feel raw and undone, that you can be better bonded to the Savior. And then you not only meet suffering on God's terms, but you meet joy on God's terms. And then God – as He does every morning at 7:30 when I cry to Him out of my affliction – happily shares His gladness, His joy flooding over heaven's walls filling my heart in a waterfall of delight... He gets your heart pumping for heaven. He injects His peace, power and perspective into your spiritual being. He imparts new ways of looking at your hardships. He puts a song in your heart.* Joni Eareckson Tada

Alexander Solzhenitsyn had long been impressed with the patience and longsuffering of Russian believers. One night in prison in Siberia, Boris Kornfeld, a Jewish doctor, sat up with Solzhenitsyn and told him the story of his conversion to Christ. The same night Kornfeld was clubbed to death. Solzhenitsyn said that Kornfeld's last words "lay upon me as an inheritance. . . It was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good . . . Bless you, prison, for having been my life." The pleasures of this life are fleeting, and the afflictions of this life are momentary and light – but the Bible says that in His presence is fullness of joy and at His right hand are pleasures forevermore. Affliction magnifies the greatness of God through joy.

Affliction grants boldness in the gospel – martyrs encourage missions

Jesus gave His disciples the secret to successful missions in the gospel of John: *Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there will My servant be also. If anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him.* John 12:24-26

Getting yourself killed doesn't seem to be the best method to recruit others for the same job. Nevertheless, God has ordained that sometimes our death is for the purpose of mobilizing others for missions and in so doing, bearing much fruit. On January 19, 1981, a group of terrorists called "M-19" broke into the S.I.L. residence in Bogota, Columbia, and kidnapped Wycliffe translator Chet Bitterman. The communiqué from the terrorists read, "Chet Bitterman will be executed unless the Summer Institute of Linguistics and all its members leave Columbia by 6:00 p.m. February 19." Wycliffe did not budge. Brenda Bitterman and her two little children waited 48 days. On March 7 the terrorists shot Chet Bitterman through the heart and left his body on a bus in Bogota.

Now most people might say that Chet was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Most people might interpret this as a breakdown in God's protection. Most people might become discouraged and quit. But after Chet's body was discovered, more than one hundred Wycliffe members in Columbia were given the choice of a new field. None left. And two hundred candidates volunteered to take Chet Bitterman's place and applications for overseas service with Wycliffe doubled. That reminds me of what Paul wrote of the effect his own imprisonment had on other believers: *And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.* Philippians 1:14

And affliction had its effect on the Thessalonians as well: *because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit,* 1 Thessalonians 1:5-6

Over fifty years ago, five young men went into the jungles of Ecuador for the sake of the gospel and never left. Jim Eliot and four others burned with a passion and commission to bring the gospel to a people group that had killed every outsider they had ever encountered. But one morning on a sand bar on a river they were all speared to death by those they sought to love. They never had the opportunity to tell these people anything about the Christ they loved and served. And we might be tempted to say, 'What a tragic waste – they could have done so much more had they lived' and we might be tempted to think that this was simply allowed by God for reasons we couldn't understand.

But years later, Steve Saint, son of Nate Saint who was one of the five men, interviewed those who speared his dad to death and said: *'As [the killers] described their recollections it occurred to me how incredibly unlikely it was that the Palm Beach killing took place at all; it is an anomaly that I cannot explain outside of divine intervention.'* In other words, there is only one explanation for why these five young men died – God planned it.. *'God took five common young men of uncommon commitment and used them for his own glory. They never had the privilege they so enthusiastically pursued to tell the Huaorani of the God they loved and served. But for every Huaorani who today follows God's trail in part because of their efforts, there are a thousand cowodi [foreigners] who follow God's trail more resolutely because of their example. The success withheld from them in life God multiplied and continues to multiply as a memorial to their obedience and his faithfulness.'* In fact applications to overseas missions organizations suddenly rose to levels never seen before. Affliction grants boldness in the gospel – martyrs encourage missions.

May this truth – that God is sovereign over all your affliction, all your suffering be the foundation of your hope and your joy, both in days of prosperity and in days of adversity. Because God has designed good in all that He has ordained for you, and in **all things** His purposes will be worked out.

Our gracious and loving Father,

May our hearts be strengthened and empowered by the knowledge that You are sovereign over all suffering, all affliction, all calamity, all evil – just as You are sovereign over all that is good and right and lovely. In those dark days of doubt and worry, when we walk through the valley of trouble, let this truth steel our resolve and comfort our souls. Grant that we would be sweetly resigned to Your disposal of us in every regard and know that nothing happens to us but what is best for us. Grant us too, the eyes to see that nothing – neither the best days of prosperity nor the worst days of adversity are worthy to be compared to the glory that is to come. Teach us O Lord to rely wholly on You and not ourselves. Make us weighty and holy through our afflictions. Let our troubles only magnify the worth of Your name and cause Your kingdom to spread to more and more people. Grant us boldness in the gospel and let our lives magnify Your greatness through joy as we delight in You through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people, we pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.