

Dr. Jack L. Arnold
Biblical Suffering

Suffering that is Undeserved

Lesson 13

SUFFERING AS MEMBERS OF THE HOUSEHOLD OF FAITH

1 Cor. 12:21-26

I once had a friend tell me, "Preach on suffering every week and you will fill your church." Realizing some truth in this statement, I replied, "That is true, but if I preached only on suffering, I would fill my church up with a lot of sick people." We must preach and learn the whole counsel of God, so when the suffering, tragedies, heartaches and persecutions come, we can be strong in Christ.

Suffering for Christ is a big concept and includes many life experiences. Suffering is not just something which affects us individually but it affects every member of the body of Christ. Suffering has effects on others as well as individual effects.

Each Christian must mature spiritually so as to get a divine perspective towards suffering. He must learn to rest back in God when the trials and difficulties come his way. The Christian walks by faith even though he does not fully understand all the testings he receives. His faith is in the God of the plan who does all things right and well. The mature Christian begins to rejoice in suffering, knowing that these trials are the very things needed in his life to conform him more and more into the image of Christ.

There is much we do not understand about the divine plan of suffering but we do know all things work together for good to them who love God and are called to salvation according to God's sovereign purpose. While we are on this side of glory, there are some things we just have to take by faith. It is like the weaver who weaves a rug. If you are on the back side of the loom or weaving machine, all you see is a maze of entangled threads, going in every direction with no discernable pattern. From the back side there seems to be no pattern or plan at all. But as soon as you step on the other side of the loom, you see that there is a pattern and the designer had it all planned out. We will only completely understand our suffering on the other side of glory when the Great Designer will show us His ultimate plan for all things. Until then, we must take His word for the fact that He is working out a great plan for our good, and rest in this by faith.

As a Christian begins to mature spiritually, he begins to see the divine plan. When a person is young in the faith, he sometimes wants to start his life over again. Not so for the mature believer. If he had his life as a Christian to live over again, he would choose the exact same life. Why? Because he realizes that the things which came into his life were brought there by God and were the exact things needed to temper his life and to conform him to Christ. The maturing Christian begins to enter into the practical aspects of the perfect will of God.

Beloved, your trials, your difficulties, your sufferings, your crisis are permitted by God and these things are just what He prescribed to make you more Christ-like. You do not want another life, but you want God to teach you everything He wants you to know through the one life He has given you.

Christians sometimes wish they were someone else, thinking if they were someone else they would not have their own problems. But if all the Christians in this room were to take a paper bag and place all their problems into it and then pass their problems to someone else, they would soon want their own problems back. You see, dear Christian, you have lived with your problems and know them better than anyone else. To accept someone else's problems would be an emotional experience which none of us could cope with. You will soon begin to realize your problems are part of the divine plan for your life, and your problems are designed for you to make you more Christ-like.

The point of this lesson is suffering as a group. God gives us lessons collectively as well as individually, for He desires to teach His church as well as individuals in the church.

SUFFERING TO KNOW HOW TO HELP OTHERS WHO ARE SUFFERING THE SAME THING
"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the

comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm because we know that just as you share in our suffering, so also you share in our comfort.” (2 Cor. 1:3-7).

It is only as a person experiences suffering that he is really able to comfort others in their suffering. A person has to suffer much before he can sympathize with others in suffering.

You really cannot comfort one in physical pain until you have experienced physical pain. Even then you cannot feel the same pain as the person who has the pain. You really cannot feel a person's sorrow yourself. You really cannot comfort another brother or sister in Christ who is suffering persecution from the world for being a faithful witness until you have felt the sting of persecution yourself.

When I was younger in the faith, I was very critical of people who cried at the death of a loved one if that person was a Christian. I claimed it was a lack of faith to do so, and there should only be joy if the person is a Christian. I felt this way because no one had died in my immediate family. Then my mother became stricken with terminal cancer and the thought of her death, even though she made a profession of Christ, caused tears to come to my eyes. Throughout the funeral I did not cry, but on the way home from the funeral, the tears just began to flow. I sobbed uncontrollably. They were real tears of love for my mother. The crying was so severe I had to pull over on the freeway and let my brother do the driving. I cried for about twenty minutes and then it was over.

One must live awhile and suffer much to have a heart for others in suffering. This is why younger people find it hard to comfort those who are older. The younger can tell you what a book says or a man says, but they cannot give advice out of years of experience. You must live and experience suffering to really empathize with those in suffering. This is why young pastors have a harder time comforting older people. The young preacher may have graduated from the school of theology but he has not yet been to the school of difficulties. Only time and experience can make a good pastor. Seminary training may make good teachers and scholars, but not good pastors. One has to live long and suffer much and then apply the Scriptures to experience to know God works before he is able to share with others.

When people are suffering in the hospital, I am at a loss for words. Sometimes the best thing to do is grip their hand tightly and pray that God will comfort them, for He alone is the great comforter.

SUFFERING TO MATURE THE BODY OF CHRIST *“Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is till lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.”* (Col. 1:24).

This is one of the unique verses in all the Bible and its interpretation is open to debate. This verse says the Christian fills up that which is lacking in Christ's suffering, indicating that Christ's suffering is not yet completed.

According to this verse, Christ is still suffering to this very hour. How is He suffering? He is suffering through the suffering of Christians as they take the gospel of Christ to others.

Christ atoned spiritually for acts of sin and the sin nature once and for all. His atoning suffering for sins is done and no one is capable of grasping the suffering He went through when He took upon Himself the sins of men. However, there are still non-atoning sufferings for sin which Christ is suffering. We know Christ suffered after his death, resurrection and ascension through the words of Christ spoken to Paul (then Saul of Tarsus) when he was going to Damascus to persecute Christians. In Acts 9:4, we are told Christ said to Paul, *“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”* Paul, before his conversion, never persecuted Christ physically or socially, but he was persecuting Christians and Christians are in union with Christ. To persecute a Christian is to persecute Christ.

As Christians, we are in spiritual union with Christ and form the body of Christ, the Church. When the Christian is persecuted, Christ is persecuted. These sufferings are necessary in order that the Church might fill up that which is lacking in Christ's suffering. These sufferings from the world are essential for the collective maturing of the Church.

The Christian cannot enter into Christ's atoning suffering (spiritual suffering for sin) but can enter into Christ's non-atoning suffering (suffering Christ received from Satan and the world as He sought to do the Father's will.)

Suffering in the cause of evangelism is a necessity for the maturing of the Church of Christ. Jesus suffered to provide the Christian's salvation. Ought not the Christian be willing to suffer to bring the good news of salvation to men?

What were some of the non-atoning sufferings of Christ into which we must enter? Christ was called crazy, illegitimate, a phony and demon possessed, and so must we. In His trials before Herod and Pilate, He was cursed, mocked, beaten, tortured, punched, spat on and laughed at and was nailed to a cross as a martyr, and this too may be our lot. He suffered many non-atoning sufferings and we too must fill up that which is lacking in Christ's affliction.

As Christians we must remember we were called to be heirs with Christ in suffering as well as in glorification ***"Now if we are children, then we are heirs-heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."*** (Rom. 8:17). ***Sometimes suffering comes in abundance. "For just as the sufferings of Christ flowed over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows."*** (2 Cor. 1:5). This suffering comes from proclaiming the gospel ***"So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God"*** (2 Tim. 1:8). The whole purpose of this suffering is that God's elect might be saved and the God of the plan might be glorified. ***"Therefore, I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory."*** (2 Tim. 2:10).

SUFFERING BECAUSE OF ANOTHER BELIEVER'S SUFFERING ***"If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it."*** (1 Cor. 12:26).

The body of Christ, the Church, is made up of individual Christians. Yet all Christians are related to one another because all are in union with the Head of the Church, Jesus Christ. When one member of the body is suffering, this affects other members in the body. Every act we do and every decision we make somehow affects another person. When one member is honored or glorified, this affects every other member.

Each member of the body of Christ can affect the total body of Christ for good or for bad. Just as one rotten apple can ruin a whole barrel of apples, so one spiritually sick Christian can affect a whole church. But the opposite is also true, just as one diamond can make a bag of rocks valuable, so one Christian can cause the whole body to feel its worth.

When one member of the body fails to do his job, there are consequences for the body as a whole. When one Christian sins and is rebellious, this will surely have an affect on some other member of the body. A sick body is a local church filled with people not exercising their spiritual gifts and not doing their responsibilities before God. A sick body always means Christ's work is hindered.

One Christian out of fellowship with his Lord, spreading vicious rumors about other Christians, can affect the whole local church so that God's blessing is withheld.

Notice it not only says Christians are to care for one another and to suffer with one another, but they are to honor or glorify one another. Christians are to rejoice when God does something wonderful for another Christian. ***"Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn."*** (Rom. 12:15).

It is much easier to weep with those who are suffering than to rejoice with those who have been blessed, because jealousy creeps in. Yet, there is to be no pride, jealousy, envy or competitiveness among true Christian brethren.