

# Called to Suffer

By Eric M. Hill

False prophets have entered our midst in sheep's clothing. Like grievous wolves, they have ripped precious truths from our heart. One such truth is the blessing of suffering.

There are three predominant beliefs about Christian suffering. First, all suffering is a blessing and comes from God (the denominationalists). Second, all suffering is a curse and comes from Satan (the prosperity preachers). Third, suffering can be either a blessing or a curse and can come from either God or Satan (the Bible).

The first belief is popularized by those who superficially believe that since God is Almighty anything that happens must be His will. I say *superficially* because no one actually believes this. This doctrine is merely an unscriptural doctrinal safety net to catch us when we can't explain something. Better to say, "It must be God's will," than to say, "I don't know why this has happened."

Yet, even the staunchest proponent of the *if-it-happens-it-must-be-the-will-of-God* doctrine lives in direct contradiction to this questionable doctrine. If a husband goes home and finds his wife being assaulted by an intruder, he doesn't say, "Praise God, it must be the Lord's will for my wife to be assaulted!" No, he fights the intruder off. Why? Because he doesn't really believe all suffering is of God.

There is often a sharp distinction between our theology and our lives. We normally have enough sense to instinctively ignore nonsensical theology when we interact with the real world. It is only in church and in our religious moments that we pretend to believe doctrines like *if-it-happens-it-must-be-the-will-of-God*. Why, even a casual examination of our lives proves that we don't really believe something so obviously wrong and indefensible.

When we are sick, do we say, "I couldn't be sick unless God wanted me sick?" No, we seek to get well, don't we? When we hunger, do we say, "I couldn't be hungry unless God wanted me hungry?" No, we seek to get rid of the hunger, don't we? If a small fire starts in our home, do we say, "Oh, praise God! A fire—God must want my home to burn down?" No, we seek to put out the fire. We do this because instinctively we know that all suffering is not of God. Again, it is only in church and in religious contemplation that we believe such foolishness as *if-it-happens-it-must-be-God's-will*.

The second belief, that all suffering is a curse and comes from Satan, is the brainchild of uninformed or dishonest prosperity preachers. That their *all-suffering-comes-from-Satan* doctrine is false is easily seen in the Scriptures. But covetousness and cowardice are powerfully blinding tools of Satan. The prosperity preachers can't see the obvious truths of the Word because they are blinded by unholy ambitions and fleshly fears. They can't even imagine the possibility of God ordained suffering. This wrecking ball of truth threatens their man-made castles of fleshly prosperity. If *some* suffering is of the Lord, then it's only logical that the negative results (from a fleshly perspective) of *some*

suffering are also of the Lord.

The prosperity preachers know their huge crowds follow them because they prophesy good things. The carnal, covetous, heathenistic, and manipulative tendencies of their itchy ears followers would never follow a God who demands death to the flesh. Money preachers created these monsters of greed and covetousness. Now they must feed the ravenous appetites of their offspring with more fleshly promises. If the prosperity preachers even hinted at preaching the true gospel of Jesus Christ, their followers would immediately cry out, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" What a tragedy that like bumbling alchemists, money preachers have found a way to turn the gold of faith into the brick of greed by their gospel of covetousness!

The third belief, that suffering can be either a blessing or curse, and can be from either God or Satan, is supported by the Word. However, our main topic is biblical, or God ordained suffering.

### **False Accusation Against Suffering Saints**

Did Jesus Christ miss God? Did He fail to walk in the promises of God? Was He familiar with Psalm 91? Did He know the power of the *word of faith*? Did He know that God had *promised* Him at least seventy years of life? Why didn't He use the promises of God to claim long life?

We are told by prosperity preachers that if we only have enough faith, and if we only follow their formulas for success, we can escape suffering. However, the Bible's record of Jesus Christ indicts and convicts them as liars. Did Jesus Christ escape suffering? Was He shielded from trials, tribulations, or even death? Did His great faith protect His flesh from hardship?

Of course, Jesus did not escape suffering. So how do we reconcile the great promises of God with Jesus' life? We do so by totally rejecting the commitment stealing false doctrines of the prosperity preachers, and by studying the Scriptures for ourselves. We must stop allowing ignorant or dishonest preachers to do our thinking. We must stop placing the welfare of wolves above God's sheep. We must repent for exalting the words of shallow preachers above the Scriptures. Only a return to the Bible can deliver our souls from the seductions of their false doctrine.

Here is where some of my friends may gasp and ask in exasperation, "Why is he against the blessings of God? Why is he so adamantly against prosperity preachers? What's his motive?"

Friends, I'm against them because their fleshly doctrine of covetousness has destroyed many of God's precious lambs. I'm against them for every false accusation hurled against a hurting or sick child of God. I'm against them because they have popularized greed and selfishness. I'm against them because they have reduced the Bible into a book

of Christian witchcraft, full of incantations and spells that usurp God's authority and sovereignty. I'm against them because they have publicly shamed the Man who died for me. I'm against them because time is short, and we don't have time to figure out ambiguous preaching.

I write this article to encourage every precious lamb of God who labors under the burden of false accusation and guilt perpetrated by prosperity preachers. Satan has deceived many into believing that their sufferings, trials, and poverty are proofs of God's displeasure. I emphatically state that *any* preacher (and I include your favorite preacher) who condemns sick, suffering, or poverty stricken saints as weak, is a false teacher, a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Here are some of their doctrines that have provoked my response:

1. Financial and material prosperity is a sign of God's approval; financial and material poverty is a sign of His disapproval.
2. Physically sick Christians are weak in faith.
3. The Bible can be used like a book of witchcraft to fulfill fleshly, selfish desires.

### **Peter's Perspective On Suffering**

Peter taught that Christians should not be ashamed to suffer, if they suffered for righteousness' sake. "And who is he who will harm you if you be followers of what is good? But even if you suffer for righteousness' sake, you are blessed..." (1 Peter 3:13, 14). And, "Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter," (1 Peter 4:16).

What kind of suffering was Peter talking about? When one considers that one of the most wicked and sadistic men to ever live was emperor of Rome when Peter wrote his epistles, one understands that Peter and the early Church faced unimaginable trials and hardships. Emperor Nero instituted a savage, empire-wide persecution against the Church. Many were fed alive to lions and other wild beasts. Some were tortured to death. Others were dipped in tar and used as human torches. Peter was crucified and Paul was beheaded. This man, Nero, even killed his wife, mother, brothers, other relatives, and his best friends. No amount of blood could quench Nero's thirst.

Christians in the Roman Empire, like Christians in North Korea, Vietnam, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and China, suffered official persecution. This meant shame, humiliation, poverty, homelessness, pain, sickness, sexual assault, extreme temptation, mental torment, and death.

In America many false teachers have risen to pseudo-Christian stardom by teaching that the above things can only happen to weak, ignorant, fearful, and faithless Christians.

However, Hebrews 11:35-39 says otherwise:

"...Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings [beatings], yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented--of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise."

Against Scriptures like these, it is obviously foolish to believe that only weak Christians suffer. Some suffering is the direct result of righteousness.

### **Some Suffering is the Will Of God**

Suffering is not only inevitable because of Satan (2 Tim. 3:12), but because of God. God has called every Christian to not only be willing to suffer for Him, but to actually suffer for Him. "And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me, cannot be My disciple," (Luke 14:27). Peter said, "...But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should, follow His steps," (1 Peter 2:20, 21).

Why would God require us to suffer? Well, why did God require Jesus to suffer? Why did God require Jesus to suffer such a shameful and agonizing death? It wasn't the method of Jesus' death, but the *fact* of His death that saved us. God could have chosen one of a million less painful ways for Jesus to die for our sins. But He didn't. Why?

"But Satan killed Jesus!" you say. I say you're making the mistake of blaming everything *apparently* negative on Satan. The Bible says God killed Jesus. Do you find this offensive? If so, I urge you to forsake your wisdom for God's wisdom. More than once Jesus said that Satan had no power over His life. When Pilate asked Jesus, "Do You not know that I have power to crucify You, and power to release You?," Jesus answered, "You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above," (John 19:10, 11). In John 10:18, Jesus said that no one had power over His life: "No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again."

Of course, Satan was involved in the death of Jesus, but He was only an ignorant tool in the hands of Almighty God. The crucifixion was initiated and consummated in heaven by God the Father long before Satan was ever created. You say, "How can God use evil to fulfill His will?" I say, You will never begin to understand this mystery until you truly believe that God is greater and wiser than you. For instance, how could God call the wicked Nebuchadnezzar His servant (Jeremiah 25:9; 27:6; 43:10)? Or the evil Assyrian king (Isaiah 10:5-15)?

He could do so because He is powerful and wise enough to orchestrate the actions of evil men in a way that His overall plan is fulfilled! Whether we like it or not, or can adequately explain it or not, God "...works all things according to the counsel of His will," (Ephesians 1:11).

Back to the crucifixion. I stated that although Satan was a tool in the crucifixion, it was God who killed Jesus. Just before He was crucified, we find Jesus praying, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for You. Take this cup [the crucifixion] away from me; nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will," (Mark 14:36).

Do you see it? Jesus said that it was the Father's will that He be crucified. Let's look at Isaiah 53:10, 11: "Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him [Jesus]; He has put him to grief. When You make His soul an offering for sin...He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied...." In Matthew 26:31, Jesus said that God would smite Him. The evidence is overwhelming that the crucifixion was born in the heart of God the Father. It is an insult to God to give such credit to Satan.

### **Jesus Christ is Our Example of Suffering**

Just as it was God's will for Christ to suffer for righteousness' sake, it is God's will that we suffer for righteousness' sake. "Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind..." (1 Pet. 4:1).

This means that we are to live totally for God and the welfare of others. Isn't that what it means to "...[L]ove the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself?" (Luke 10:27). If you are armed with this same mind of sacrifice for God and others, you will not "...[t]hink it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you," (1 Peter 4:12).

### **Other Reasons Why God Requires Suffering**

God could have chosen a shorter, less painful way for Jesus to die. Yet He chose the most shameful and painful death for His Son. One reason He chose crucifixion is because it was graphic. In one brilliant move God showed the extreme wickedness of evil humanity and the extreme goodness of Himself. The Cross revealed infinite hatred and infinite love. Our hatred of God, and His love of us.

We often think of the Cross as a past tense event, but God never intended His Sacrifice to become just a memory. The Cross isn't history; it's reality. It is supposed to be demonstrated daily in our lives. That's why Jesus said, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me," (Luke 9:23).

We like to tell people that God's love *was* demonstrated on the Cross. However, God hasn't called the Church to simply teach the Cross. He has called us to live the Cross. This means that we must show the world the same level of sacrificial love that Jesus showed them on the Cross. How do we do this? By walking so close to Jesus Christ that His beauty blinds us to the sinful attractions of the world, and deadens us to the sinful impulses of the flesh. Only as our eyes are intensely focused on Jesus and eternity can we break free from the gravitational pull of selfishness.

God will put you in positions to graphically display His love to this wicked generation. This means more than words. You will have to *act out* His love. You will have to show the world how much God loves them. This will mean hardship and suffering. It will mean pain and loneliness. It will mean false accusations and persecution. But graphic love is God's only way of salvation.

Another reason God requires suffering is it proves our love for Him. Love and faith are useless until proven. Suffering exposes the secrets of our heart. How many times have we seen Christians become bitter and fall away in times of suffering? Their love and faith were counterfeit. They couldn't stand the test of temptation. It's like a husband who is faithful to his wife only when he isn't tempted. What kind of relationship is that? I've seen this attitude repeatedly among disciples of prosperity preachers. They follow God as long as they can explain and manipulate Him (so they think). But when tragedy or trial rolls over their faith confession like an army tank over a flower bed, they are shocked, confused, and embittered. They frantically search for another book, tape, or conference to discover what lever they forgot to pull. Unfortunately, all they are offered are bigger shovels to dig themselves into deeper holes of darkness.

These false converts fall away because they never understood the gospel. They never understood that God has called *every* Christian to die to the flesh. They thought that Jesus died to the flesh so they could live in the flesh. When they finally saw that God requires us to divorce ourselves from the world, they were offended and fell away.

### **Suffering Disciplines the Flesh and Prepares Us for a Greater Revelation of Jesus**

When Paul was savagely persecuted by Satan, he prayed three times for God to remove the thorn in the flesh. God answered, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). God's refusal to remove Paul's suffering, and His explanation, lifted Paul to a level of spiritual understanding that from that point on nullified Satan's fiercest attacks against him. What do you do with a man who has learned not only to rejoice in tribulation for Christ's sake, but to actually prefer it? Listen to Paul's new revelation of the secret of spiritual intimacy with Christ, and power with God:

"Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in

persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

(2 Corinthians 12:9, 10)

Paul learned something that we despise. He learned that Christ increased in him only as his flesh decreased. Like it or not, suffering is God's primary way of shutting down our flesh. Even Jesus (as a man) learned obedience through suffering. "[T]hough He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered," (Hebrews 5:8).

The secret of God ordained suffering so excited Paul that he wrote, "[t]hat I may know Him and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to His death..." (Phillipians 3:10).

Paul learned that life in the Spirit can only be secured through death in the flesh. He also learned that Satan's greatest obstacles were only stepping stones to greater glory. He could say with Joseph, "...you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good..." (Genesis 50:20). Some blessings don't look like blessings until the end of the story. (This is a sublime truth that prosperity preachers can't grasp.)

### **Suffering for Christ is an Honor**

Those who suffer for Christ bring special glory to God. As a reward, a special measure of the Spirit rests upon all those who suffer for righteousness' sake. "If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you," (1 Pet. 4:14).

The Church was founded upon the lives of servants who were willing to suffer for Christ. Jesus told Peter that his own crucifixion in old age would *glorify* God, (John 21:18,19). Today we would accuse Peter's dead corpse of being weak and faithless.

When the apostles were beaten by the hypocritical Sanhedrin council "...they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name," (Acts 5:41).

In Acts 14:22 the apostles told their disciples that "...We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God." The Jerusalem Council sent letters of commendation for Paul and Barnabas noting their sacrificial dedication. They called them, "men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ," (Acts 15:26).

When Stephen preached to the Sanhedrin, a mob stoned him. Before he died "...he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said, 'Look!' I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God," (Acts 7:55, 56). Does this sound like a weak or ignorant saint? He was according to our standards. Can we trust these standards?

Don't let prosperity preachers make you ashamed of suffering for Christ. Rejoice in tribulation! God will reward you in the resurrection of the just!

"I know your works, and tribulation, and poverty (but thou art rich)...Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer...Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life," (Revelation 2:9, 10).

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