

PERSECUTION & SUFFERING

a blog series by Curtis Sergeant

2017

Persecution and Suffering (P&S) Series - Curtis Sergeant - 2017

I am starting a series of posts on the topic of persecution and suffering. I believe this is an important topic that the church today (especially in the West) does not pay enough attention to. I would say that this is important because it is a major topic of Scripture. I also believe it is a major way the Lord grows us as disciples. In fact, I propose there is more said about how we can grow through persecution and suffering than about how we can grow through Scripture, prayer, and "body life" combined.

I want to make it clear that I am talking about persecution and suffering for doing what is right, not persecution and suffering for the sake of correction or for stupid things we might do. It is entirely possible to suffer for doing wrong. Having said that, many of the benefits that come from our proper response to suffering for doing what is right can also accrue to us even as a result of suffering we bring upon ourselves if we respond appropriately.

The major focus of this series is to help us to recognize those intended or possible benefits and respond well to the suffering we experience. In that way, the suffering will not be wasted. If we respond poorly then the enemy and the kingdom of darkness will achieve their purpose through it. God has good intentions for us in all the suffering He allows. If we respond appropriately, we will be blessed as we experience the good He intends for us. Let's cooperate with His intentions for our own good and for the sake of the Kingdom and the King. In Scripture quotations I will denote portions that guide us in our proper response to suffering in **green highlighting**, and those portions that speak to the resulting blessings in **yellow highlighting**.

I have been in several settings among believers where everyone was sharing their favorite Bible promises. Never once on those occasions did anyone mention 2 Timothy 3:12, "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." Though we may not particularly favor this verse, it actually is a great and even desirable promise because of what its result will be.

Even beyond the positive results, it also can be evidence that we are on the right track in desiring and living a godly life in Christ Jesus. If we are only experiencing a life of ease, we can suspect that we are not posing a threat to the enemy, to the kingdom of darkness. If we are a threat to the enemy, we will face opposition from him. We are targets. The enemy has a purpose for these attacks, and it is to silence us. The Lord also has purposes, holy purposes. This series is about seeking to fulfill those purposes.

I am at the point in my spiritual life where I begin to wonder what I am doing wrong if I am not facing fairly difficult challenges. I find it oddly comforting to know that my temporary difficulties are resulting in eternal gain. In following the Lord whole-heartedly, we "win" no matter what the enemy may do to us.

Most believers are familiar with the story of Joseph. He was unfairly sold into slavery by his brothers because of their envy. He was then unfairly imprisoned for doing what was right. Then he was forgotten by someone he helped in prison. Then, in the end, the Lord elevated him to a high position in the foreign land where he was living. Later, his brothers came to purchase food from him and they did not recognize him. He made himself known to them and then he said this in Genesis 45:5-8:

“And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because **it was to save lives** that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you **to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance**. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt.”

We read nearly the same statement by Joseph years later in Genesis 50:19-21. Joseph recognized God’s hand at work through all the injustice and defamation and suffering and separation from his family and homeland. He did not harbor anger or bitterness against the people who were God’s instruments in all those difficulties. His focus was on doing God’s work and pursuing God’s purposes whether he was a slave or in prison or in a position of great power and influence. He trusted God and was content to play whatever role God had for him and trust God’s goodness and timing no matter what the personal cost. May we do the same.

We already looked at the story of Joseph. It is an illustration of Psalm 66:10-12:

“For you, **God, tested us**; you **refined us** like silver.

You brought us into prison and laid burdens on our backs.

You let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and water, but you **brought us to a place of abundance.**”

Here the psalmist recognizes God at work in his suffering. He also recognizes God’s purposes. In this case, God’s purposes were to test and refine the psalmist. The means was a variety of difficulties – imprisonment, hard labor, subjugation, and either literally or figuratively, fire and flood.

Again, there is a recognition of God’s complete authority and wisdom and goodness through tremendous pain and suffering. There is a trust in the Lord to bring His people through difficulties in the end and give them reward and comfort. For some that reward and comfort may well be delayed until eternity, but the Lord is trustworthy. We can trust Him to do what is right and what is best.

Lamentations 3:1-57 reminds us that sometimes our suffering is because of our own sin, as God's way of punishing and correcting us:

- ¹ I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of the LORD's wrath.
- ² He has driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light;
- ³ indeed, he has turned his hand against me again and again, all day long.
- ⁴ He has made my skin and my flesh grow old and has broken my bones.
- ⁵ He has besieged me and surrounded me with bitterness and hardship.
- ⁶ He has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead.
- ⁷ He has walled me in so I cannot escape; he has weighed me down with chains.
- ⁸ Even when I call out or cry for help, he shuts out my prayer.
- ⁹ He has barred my way with blocks of stone; he has made my paths crooked.
- ¹⁰ Like a bear lying in wait, like a lion in hiding,
- ¹¹ he dragged me from the path and mangled me and left me without help.
- ¹² He drew his bow and made me the target for his arrows.
- ¹³ He pierced my heart with arrows from his quiver.
- ¹⁴ I became the laughingstock of all my people; they mock me in song all day long.
- ¹⁵ He has filled me with bitter herbs and given me gall to drink.
- ¹⁶ He has broken my teeth with gravel; he has trampled me in the dust.
- ¹⁷ I have been deprived of peace; I have forgotten what prosperity is.
- ¹⁸ So I say, "My splendor is gone and all that I had hoped from the LORD."
- ¹⁹ I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall.
- ²⁰ I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me.
- ²¹ Yet **this I call to mind** and therefore **I have hope**:
- ²² **Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.**
- ²³ **They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.**
- ²⁴ I say to myself, "**The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.**"
- ²⁵ The **LORD is good** to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him;
- ²⁶ **it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.**
- ²⁷ **It is good for a man to bear the yoke while he is young.**
- ²⁸ **Let him sit alone in silence, for the LORD has laid it on him.**
- ²⁹ **Let him bury his face in the dust— there may yet be hope.**
- ³⁰ **Let him offer his cheek to one who would strike him, and let him be filled with disgrace.**
- ³¹ For no one is cast off by the Lord forever.
- ³² Though he brings grief, **he will show compassion**, so **great is his unfailing love.**
- ³³ For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone.
- ³⁴ To crush underfoot all prisoners in the land,
- ³⁵ to deny people their rights before the Most High,
- ³⁶ to deprive them of justice— would not the Lord see such things?
- ³⁷ Who can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not decreed it?
- ³⁸ Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come?
- ³⁹ **Why should the living complain when punished for their sins?**

⁴⁰ Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD.

⁴¹ Let us lift up our hearts and our hands to God in heaven, and say:

⁴² "We have sinned and rebelled and you have not forgiven.

⁴³ "You have covered yourself with anger and pursued us; you have slain without pity.

⁴⁴ You have covered yourself with a cloud so that no prayer can get through.

⁴⁵ You have made us scum and refuse among the nations.

⁴⁶ "All our enemies have opened their mouths wide against us.

⁴⁷ We have suffered terror and pitfalls, ruin and destruction."

⁴⁸ Streams of tears flow from my eyes because my people are destroyed.

⁴⁹ My eyes will flow unceasingly, without relief,

⁵⁰ until the LORD looks down from heaven and sees.

⁵¹ What I see brings grief to my soul because of all the women of my city.

⁵² Those who were my enemies without cause hunted me like a bird.

⁵³ They tried to end my life in a pit and threw stones at me;

⁵⁴ the waters closed over my head, and I thought I was about to perish.

⁵⁵ I called on your name, LORD, from the depths of the pit.

⁵⁶ You heard my plea: "Do not close your ears to my cry for relief."

⁵⁷ You came near when I called you, and you said, "Do not fear."

Even when the calamities that come upon us are due to our own sinfulness, however, Jeremiah recognizes that God's goodness and mercy are in view. Even then, the Lord is acting for our own good. This is highlighted in verses 21-25 and 31-36.

Jeremiah gives helpful guidance on how we are to respond in such situations. Note all the instructions he gives in the passage. In summary, we are to repent and believe. We are to submit to God's ways and trust Him to know what is right and to do it. We are to devote ourselves to His path and trust His timing. We are to call on Him.

Matthew 5:4 tells us, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." This is related to the old saying, "God afflicts the comfortable and comforts the afflicted." If we want to be on the right side of this equation for all eternity then I would far rather face affliction now and comfort for eternity. You remember in the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 6:19-31, in verse 25 it says "But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.'"

In the seemingly upside-down Kingdom of God, delayed gratification is extreme. The discipline and training and testing provided by various afflictions help to prepare us for an eternity of reaping the benefits of character and strength and soundness. This is especially true in the Kingdom of God, but we recognize similar principles even in earthly endeavors. General Norman Schwarzkopf said, "The more you sweat in peace, the less you bleed in

war.” The idea is that thorough and intense training prepares soldiers for greater effectiveness.

One of the personal frustrations in my life is when people misunderstand the place of “good works” in Kingdom living for the Lord. It is a plain and obvious fact that we can do nothing to earn our salvation. It is entirely free and sets us free from sin and shame and death. We can and should rejoice and relax in this wonderful blessing. Some people, however, then have a distorted view of labor for the Kingdom. They misunderstand completely its valuable and prominent role and place in a life lived for the Lord. They immediately object when anyone begins to speak of discipline and sacrifice, claiming that Jesus wants us to dance rather than march.

I propose that Jesus wants us to march with joy and love and gratitude and freedom. Here I am speaking of marching in terms of disciplined obedience to the Lord. The fact that we are free and still choose to submit to whatever He asks, whenever He asks, however He asks, is a demonstration of our great love for Him. Anyone who understands salvation knows that it has nothing to do with seeking to earn salvation. It still has a vital role, however, in living for the Kingdom. It is a demonstration of our love and obedience. It demonstrates our allegiance and devotion. It prepares us for an eternity of serving the Lord and one another.

As Paul says in 2 Timothy 2:3-4, “Join with me in suffering, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets entangled in civilian affairs, but rather tries to please his commanding officer.” Let us then commit ourselves to suffering well for the Lord and His Kingdom. Let us be ready to do His will even when it means sacrifice and suffering. It is precisely our willingness to do so that shows everyone His greatness and goodness and worthiness. He is worth suffering for. We will have an eternity to dance without sacrifice or suffering.

Matthew 5:10 tells us, “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” In some way, then, the persecution of God’s people is connected with their inheritance in the Kingdom. This should not be a surprise since we are promised in 2 Timothy 3:12, “Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”

Persecution is a sign that accompanies godly living and is an evidence of our priorities and purpose in living for the King and His Kingdom rather than for ease and comfort and peace and prosperity in this world. Paul speaks of this in Galatians 1:10 when he says, “Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ.” He speaks the hard and necessary truth to the Galatians and to everyone else even though he knows it will result in hardship and opposition.

The point is not that we should seek out persecution, but that we should fully do and say everything the Lord asks us to, in the way He asks us to, no matter how unpleasant the result may be for us.

In Matthew 5:11-12 Jesus says, “**Blessed** are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. **Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven**, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” Therefore, our suffering for the sake of Christ results in our great reward in heaven.

Of course, this does not apply to suffering because of our own foolishness or wrongdoing. There are many cases, however, when the Lord asks us to do something that will result in our being maligned or mistreated or slandered or opposed. The question in those situations is whether we will obey and face the consequences or shrink back for the sake of our own reputation and well-being.

This is much the same situation as Jesus speaks about in relation to doing our righteous acts in order to be seen by men in Matthew 6:1-8: “Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”

You cannot have your cake and eat it to. Either you live for reward in this world or in the coming world. You cannot have it both ways. Living for the coming Kingdom means you will not be welcome in this one. Seeking the coming Kingdom means actively opposing and seeking to change the present world. That will result in opposition if we are pursuing it as we should. The wonderful news is that we will be abundantly rewarded. This is why we are told to rejoice greatly when we suffer in this way.

Matthew 5:38-45

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, **do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek**

also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, **love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you**, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."

This is probably one of the least popular passages in the Bible. It is clear but it is not what we want to hear. In fact, in our own strength it is nearly impossible. Obedience to these commands, at least with joy, is only possible through the Holy Spirit within us.

Jesus modeled this for us, even to the point of death. In fact, even down to the details, this could be a commentary on His crucifixion. He did not resist. He turned the other cheek during His trial and its aftermath. He gave up all His clothing. He carried the cross to the point of collapse. He loved His enemies and prayed for them even while on the cross.

Jesus tells us in doing these things we will be like our Father in heaven. He demonstrated these characteristics as well, showing love to the evil and the good, regardless of their hearts or their behavior. We are to respond with this sort of equanimity and blessing as well. Our universal response to others is to be pure love regardless of how they treat us. This is how we demonstrate we are God's children.

Matthew 10:34-39

"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn 'a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law— a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.' **Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.**"

The things we are willing to sacrifice for the sake of Christ reveal where He ranks in our priorities. It demonstrates our level of commitment. Is He truly the "pearl of great price" (Matthew 13:45-46) in our estimation? Do we value Him more than any relationship and more than our own lives?

If we do, then the loss of anything for His sake will be met with pure joy because we have all we desire in Him. In Philippians 3:7-8 Paul says, **"But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ."**

This means we can constantly rejoice because Christ is in us and we are in Christ. No external circumstance can change this all-important reality. As Paul says elsewhere, "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39)

In fact, it is us actually suffering loss of lesser things that proves we are His. It is in dying to ourselves that we are able to live in Him. It is in seeking Him that we lose everything else, including our own lives. The result is life - eternal, abundant, and true life.

Jesus speaks to His followers in Luke 9:23-25, "Then he said to them all: 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?'"

Part of the very definition of being a follower of Christ is that we do not follow our own desires and preferences. By choosing to follow Jesus, we are choosing (in this earthly life), to live in a way that is uncomfortable and difficult and sacrificial and selfless. This is how Jesus lived and how He asks us to live as well.

In Philippians 2:3-8 Paul exhorts us, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: 'Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!'"

Jesus then, is to be our model. One of the reasons we are left on earth after we choose to follow Christ is in order that we can be made more like Him. A major part of being conformed to His image is us learning to emulate Him in sacrificial service and humility. In suffering, if we do it willingly and with joy, we are made more like Him and are identified with Him.

In John 15:1-2, Jesus says, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful."

Being "in Christ" means we will bear fruit. Fruit is evidence of His life in us. Later in this chapter in verse 8 we are told, "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples." At the very heart of our purpose is glorifying God. Thus, bearing fruit, even much fruit, is an indispensable aspect of our core reason for existing.

One important purpose and reason for suffering in our lives is to "prune" us so we will bear more fruit. For a time, I was a blackberry farmer. You have to be a heartless person if you are a successful blackberry farmer. Each year from each blackberry plant you allow only two shoots (canes) to grow. You cut off all the rest. Then you regularly prune off all branches or shoots that grow off of those two. What is left you tie off to the stake and the two wires between stakes so that all that remains is tied to those supports. That means you end up pruning about 90% of the growth. In the end, the entire plant is covered with large, luscious, delicious blackberries. The plants couldn't possibly produce that amount of fruit if the plants had not been brutally pruned. Also, the plants couldn't possibly support that amount of weight if they weren't tied inextricably along the supporting wires and stakes. The "extreme" pruning is necessary if you want to maximize fruitfulness.

I no longer farm blackberries. We do have wild blackberries in our area, however. My wife goes out each year to harvest some of them. They are much smaller and do not taste as sweet. They are also not nearly as fruitful. What takes my wife all day to harvest from wild blackberries could be harvested in five minutes from well-cultivated blackberry bushes.

In the same way, God's pruning us, through difficulties and suffering, is for our good and His glory. Therefore, we can rejoice in it.

In John 16:33 Jesus says, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

The good news for children of God is that suffering and persecution are only temporary. For at most one hundred years we will suffer, but then we will share in Jesus' victory over death and hell and evil for all eternity. Revelation 21:3b-4 speaks of a vision of the future when a voice from heaven announces, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

We can be of good courage, knowing this future hope is sure. We are to live in a state of peace, having this assurance. We are to be encouraged because we know how the story ends. In the end, we win with the Lord.

Acts 5: 40b-42 says, “They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.”

This is an example of the proper response to persecution. The enemy, Satan, has a purpose for persecution. It is to silence us. The proper response is to consider the persecution an honor and to persist in our faithful promotion of God’s glory and Kingdom.

When we are persecuted for the sake of Christ it is a great honor for we are being identified with Him. The best way for us to honor Him in this situation is to continue to obey His command, His purpose, His intention, for spreading the good news that He is the King. He is a good King, a gracious King, a righteous King, a powerful King, a saving King, a worthy King, a loving King. He deserves all our love and devotion and obedience and service. We are privileged to have the opportunity to know Him and to serve Him.

In light of this privilege to know and serve and love Him, any cost in terms of our convenience, comfort, safety, or survival is inconsequential. The importance of our relationships, our possessions or our lives is nothing in comparison to the opportunity to know and serve Him. This is the natural and normal attitude we will have toward suffering for Him if we truly understand Who He Is.

In Acts 8:1b-5, Luke tells us, “On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there.”

Interestingly, God had clearly told His followers, via the apostles in Jerusalem, to go to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the end of the earth to be His witnesses (Acts 1:8). They had not gone. Now, persecution arises in Jerusalem causing His followers to go out to Judea and Samaria, and still the apostles do not go. At any rate, at that time, due to the persecution, the gospel began to be spread to Judea and Samaria. This was essential for the advance of the Kingdom.

Hence we see that God can use persecution and suffering to move people where he needs them to be. This can happen on an individual level, as we have seen in a previous look at Joseph, or on a larger level such as we see here. It can be done to move the messenger of the gospel or the receivers of that message. I believe that is part of God's purpose in the massive refugee movements we are currently seeing around the world. I believe that may also be part of God's plan in many natural disasters. He seems quite willing to use temporal suffering to create opportunities for eternal blessing.

In 1 Thessalonians 1:6-10 Paul says, "You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath."

We can see from this passage that receiving the Lord and His message in the context of severe suffering, and doing so with joy, is how we imitate the Lord, and please Him. This is also how we set an example for other believers. Paul had done this for the Thessalonians and they had in turn done that for those in the provinces of Macedonia and Achaia.

Such perseverance through suffering is inextricably intertwined with one's testimony of the gospel. It serves as irrefutable evidence of one's sincerity in turning away from any other commitment to serve God alone. It also demonstrates that He alone is worthy, that He alone is worth any amount of suffering. It points toward our unshakeable hope for eternal reward in the Lord.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:14-15 Paul says, "For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to everyone."

We see from this that one's example in experiencing persecution and in responding to suffering are of value and encouragement for other followers of Christ who are undergoing the same. God's people in the churches of Judea provided a model for the churches in Thessalonica in this regard.

Our suffering and our response to it, then, helps equip other believers. We can prepare them and support them in their future suffering by responding appropriately to our current

suffering. We can give them solace and hope. Indeed, we can do this for all subsequent generations. Thus, our present suffering can have a cascading benefit for God's people if we face it well.

In 2 Thessalonians 1:3-7 Paul says, "We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love all of you have for one another is increasing. Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring. All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels."

First, note that it is for God and His Kingdom that the Thessalonians are suffering. Secondly, the fact that they are persevering in their faith in the midst of the persecution demonstrates their increasing faith and love for one another. More than that, it shows God's righteous judgment, as it foreshadows the punishment of His enemies and eternal comfort and reward of His people.

It is by our faith and hope that we can respond now to our difficulties in such a way that proves our confidence. That faith is also increased in us and in others who observe it when we act upon it. In this way we manifest His life within us and exhibit our worthiness to inherit the Kingdom He bestows upon us. (These are Paul's words: "you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God.")

In 2 Corinthians 1:3-7 it says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer; and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort."

Very simply, this means that through our sufferings (and subsequent comfort from Christ) we are equipped to help others who are suffering. We have experienced, and will experience even more fully in the future, this same benefit through Christ. Ultimately, we will receive permanent and eternal comfort with Him in glory. Even in the present we experience comfort through the ministry of the Holy Spirit within us.

Therefore, both our sufferings and our comfort can result in comfort for others. Again, this is a reason for rejoicing. The only condition on others receiving this comfort is that they patiently endure. So we see again, that all these possible and intended benefits are conditional upon our appropriate response. That response is not to become bitter or angry or resentful or discouraged, but rather to patiently endure.

In 2 Corinthians 4:7-11 Paul writes, “But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body.”

We can see from this passage that apparently overwhelming difficulties are to be our constant companions all along the path we walk with Christ. This is not to be something that we need to demonstrate faithfulness in on one or two occasions. It is to be a constant state as long as we are in our earthly bodies. One reason for this is because that exhibits God’s power and is evidence of His greatness. His life is most clearly manifested to a watching world when we victoriously endure the greatest opposition. Impossible circumstances give opportunity to show forth His infinite power and greatness.

It is analogous to a turtle on a fencepost. If you are walking through the countryside and you see a turtle perched on a fencepost, you do not say, “My! What an amazing turtle.” Instead you immediately wonder who placed the turtle on the fencepost. In the same way, God’s people overcoming huge challenges and losses and sorrows serves to point people to our amazing God.

In 2 Corinthians 4:12-15 Paul continues, “So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. It is written: ‘I believed; therefore I have spoken.’ Since we have that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself. All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.”

Paul is saying the fact that he is able to endure great suffering provides an opportunity for his testimony of God’s sufficiency and trustworthiness. Just as God raised Jesus from the dead, and gives strength to Paul to endure difficulties, so He will preserve His people to present them complete to Himself for all eternity. This confidence creates an opportunity for overwhelming praise and thanksgiving to be given to God for His glory. This is all the

more true as greater numbers of people witness God's power in His people as they endure suffering and so should result in our thanksgiving for overwhelming circumstances.

In 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 Paul goes on, "Therefore **we do not lose heart**. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet **inwardly we are being renewed day by day**. For **our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all**. So **we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal**."

This is perhaps the best news of all related to our suffering in this life, and a cause for us to be encouraged in the midst of trouble. Though our bodies are being battered and crushed, and our souls are being stretched and tormented, the results for our eternal selves are wonderful. We are being strengthened. We are gaining in eternal glory and honor. We are attaining eternal benefits for our temporary pressure.

This means we need to focus on the presently invisible but enduring blessings which are accrue to us through the temporary adversities we face. Delayed gratification is essential to the life of a disciple. It is necessary for our survival and is a defining characteristic of a follower of Christ.

In 2 Corinthians 6:3-10 Paul says, "**We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited**. Rather, **as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything**."

Here, Paul is listing the ways he is encouraging faith in others and avoiding doing anything that might hinder people's faith. Notice how many of these items are related either to suffering or to his response to suffering. He cites these items first, before more "positive" items. Then he highlights that both have a significant role by contrasting pairs of apparently good and bad situations, and closes by demonstrating the paradox of how God uses apparent negatives to bring about positive results. This is another example of the "upside down" Kingdom.

God brings good out of what His enemies intend for evil. He demonstrates His power in our weakness. He shows forth His hope and joy and love through us in circumstances the world would respond to with despair, grief and hate.

In 2 Corinthians 11:23-29 Paul says, "Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?"

This is an interesting passage. Paul clearly equates the degree of suffering one experiences in service to Christ as a measure of commitment to Him and service for Him. In other words, the more one suffers for the sake of Christ, the greater devotion is demonstrated and the more fully one belongs to Him. This explains why the early followers of Christ rejoiced greatly that they were counted worthy to suffer for His Name (Acts 5:41). What we sacrifice for Christ in terms of comfort and safety and honor and security and convenience is evidence of our love for Him.

It is of note, that the internal pressures and anguish arising from love and concern for the body of Christ, are considered, perhaps, an even greater burden than the litany of external challenges. This is an expression of the fact that it is easier to suffer oneself than to see loved ones suffer. It is easier for a man to suffer than to see his wife and children suffer. The more influential one becomes in Kingdom service, the greater the spiritual family that one serves. This opens them up to concern and compassion of a much wider nature.

Early in my ministry the Lord prepared me for this type of situation. I was in an area where telephones had not been available yet. I found myself at a place where there was one of the first telephones but the person who had just moved in did not know the number of the telephone. I was sharing with my host my deep concern for a team I had just trained and sent into a very dangerous situation. Suddenly the phone rang for the first time. The host answered it. The call was for me. I assumed it was the (Communist) government, letting me know I was under surveillance. I answered it and found the call was from the team I was concerned about. They had a satellite phone. The Lord miraculously gave them the number of the place I was staying. They were calling to tell me things were going well. As soon as they delivered the message, they hung up.

The message was clear. God was telling me that He was in control. The team belonged to Him and not to me. He had called them, not me. He alone would determine if they remained safe or if they were thrown into prison. He loved them more than I did. I needed to trust Him as a faithful Creator to do what was right and best.

Many times, I have gratefully looked back on that clear lesson. Many people whom I have led to the Lord, whom I have trained, whom I have challenged to go into difficult regions, have suffered. Many people, from many countries and to many countries have been martyred for their faith. They have been held captive for years. Many have been imprisoned for years. They have been tortured in horrible and unimaginable ways. They have had their children taken from them. They have had their homes confiscated. They have been fined. They have lived for years as fugitives, constantly on the run. The weight of all that suffering would have been unbearable for me if not for the Lord's clear message to me many years ago. He is in control. We win in the end.

Paul makes a clear statement in 2 Corinthians 12:7b-10: "Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Every person has their own areas of weakness. For example, I have never struggled with fear as many people do, but I have battled my entire life against pride (as well as selfishness and laziness). Evidently, pride was an issue for Paul as well. Paul recognized that his "thorn in the flesh," although painful to endure, was a gift from God. It was God's tool for helping deal with Paul's pride. It showed Paul his inability to deal with it, his weakness.

As a result, Paul was able to rejoice in every "negative" thing that happened to him, knowing that God was using those things to refine his character and show the power of God in him. In fact Paul said he actually delighted in those things. Those areas of personal weakness and helplessness actually became the things he took pride in because of how they testified to God's greatness in being able to use such a weak instrument.

In Romans 5:3-5 Paul says, "Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."

This is an exceptionally encouraging list of the results of suffering. It brings about perseverance, character, and hope that will be fulfilled and will not disappoint. That hope is assured because of God's Holy Spirit and the love He has poured out within us. As a result, Paul tells us that the suffering is a cause to glory in it, or take pride in it.

We see an example of that when Paul is defending his apostleship in 2 Corinthians 11:16-33. He lists all the suffering he underwent as a basis for boasting and an evidence that he has authority.

Also, the character that is developed is something that will benefit us for all eternity. This is yet another example of how temporary pain produces eternal benefits by God's grace.

In Romans 8:16-18, Paul says, "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. 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. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."

This seems to be a strange statement. It says it is those who share in Christ's sufferings are the ones who are His heirs and will share His glory. Our suffering with Him and for Him is evidence that we belong to Him. It is this suffering, along with the Holy Spirit's testimony with our spirits, that provides the assurance that we are His.

And again, we see that the price of the suffering is more than amply rewarded by the eternal results of that suffering. The temporary pain we experience pales in comparison to the glory we will receive for all eternity. This is indeed cause for great rejoicing.

In Romans 8:35-39, Paul says, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: 'For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

No challenge or difficulty or problem or pain or power can separate us from God's love. Paul tells us that means that we win. We are conquerors of all these tribulations. The greatness of the reward, being with God and loved by Him, makes the cost of suffering anything, more than worth it. Knowing Him and being known by Him are the ultimate

reward. The more we are allowed to overcome for His sake, the more our lives testify to the truth of His worthiness.

In fact, the more we suffer for Him, the more intimately we come to know Him and be identified with Him. God's grace in this is unimaginable. We should certainly take heart in the midst of all our troubles.

In Philippians 1:12-17, Paul says, "Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear. It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice."

Paul writes this from prison and he is speaking about his imprisonment. He is noting how many good things have resulted from his persecution. All the soldiers in the palace guard and indeed, everyone who heard of his imprisonment realized his mistreatment was for the sake of Christ. All the followers of Christ who heard of his suffering, were emboldened to speak out more confidently in sharing the gospel more widely and without fear, seeing how God was strengthening and using Paul from prison. Paul sees how God's Kingdom is being advanced both among believers and unbelievers alike, since God is making His name more famous even among those seeking to hurt Paul.

In other words, Paul recognizes that in Christ, we win no matter what the enemy tries to do to stop us. I spent years working closely with the major house church networks in China. They have a slogan that goes like this: "If you imprison me, you free me to share the gospel openly. If you put me in solitary confinement, you enable me to meditate on scripture and to pray. If you beat me, you allow me to glorify God. If you seize my home or farm, you are freeing me to travel widely to spread the gospel. If you kill me, you are sending me to glory." That slogan makes it clear that no matter what the enemy does, we win. Everything the powers of darkness do to try to stop us, only serves to advance the cause of the Kingdom.

Therefore, we can and should rejoice in our difficulties. Paul did. We can. God uses our troubles for our good and His glory.

Philippians 3:7-11 says, “But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in—Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.”

Paul sets an example for us here. He considers the loss of his reputation, his accomplishments, his learning, his possessions and his life to be a small price to pay for the opportunity to know Christ and to be “in Him,” having His righteousness and His life.

Paul realizes that the path to intimacy with God and eternal life with God lies through suffering and even death. It is through suffering with and for the Lord that we come to know Him. It is through suffering with and for the Lord that we are made like Him, and we are conformed to His likeness, His image. If we are to share His glory, it is only through sharing in His suffering and death.

When we come to this realization, we understand that sacrifices for the sake of the Lord and His Kingdom are not only natural and necessary, but welcome. Nothing will matter to us except loving and pleasing and serving the Lord.

In 2 Timothy 2:3-4, Paul tells Timothy, “Join with me in suffering, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets entangled in civilian affairs, but rather tries to please his commanding officer.”

We expect soldiers to be ready to make all sorts of sacrifices in order to carry out their duties. They may have to sleep out in the open, forsake all the comforts of home, leave their friends and families, and live in constant danger, taking great risks in order that they might serve their nation. They focus not on their own comfort or convenience or pleasure, but rather the instructions of their commanding officer.

We are to serve in that same way as soldiers of the King, serving His will and seeking to advance His Kingdom. This means we are to be willing to suffer for Jesus’ sake. This is not a cause for special praise. This is the natural by-product of our position, which we have willingly taken on.

In Luke 17:7-10, Jesus says, “Suppose one of you has a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, ‘Come along now and sit down to eat’? Won’t he rather say, ‘Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink’? Will he thank the servant

because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'"

In the same way, suffering is part of the job description for citizen-soldiers of the Kingdom. Our appropriate response is to expect suffering willingly, and not to complain or whine about it. The difference between us and the soldier or the slave, is that we will be honored and rewarded and glorified for all eternity as God's children. The pay is a lot better for soldiers of the King!

In 2 Timothy 2:11-13 Paul says, "This saying is trustworthy: 'If we have died with him we shall also live with him; if we persevere we shall also reign with him. But if we deny him he will deny us. If we are unfaithful he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself.'"

It is evident from this passage that our response to tribulations is critical. We are to persevere. As in the parable of the soils in Matthew 13, Mark 4, and Luke 8, "Those on the rocky ground are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away." (Luke 8:13). Trials are a test to see whether or not our roots are in Christ.

If our roots are in Christ we will persevere. If He is our foundation, we will stand in the storms. In Matthew 7:24-27 Jesus said, "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

If we do not persevere, but rather deny Him by word or deed, by action or inaction, He will deny us. In Luke 9:26, He says, "Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels."

We are to be bold emissaries of the Kingdom. 2 Corinthians 5:20 says, "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God."

The enemy has a purpose for persecution. His purpose is to silence us. If we allow persecution or the fear of persecution to silence our testimony, we are collaborating with the enemy. Let us rather, boldly and openly stand for our King and His Kingdom in the midst of persecutions and threats.

There are a couple of passages in Hebrews that always astound me. One of them is in Hebrews 2:9-10: "But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered."

The part that surprises me is that it says Jesus was made perfect by what He suffered. Not that He was ever imperfect in any way, yet in some sense He could not be complete or all that He was intended to be apart from suffering. If that was true for Jesus, how much more so will it be true for us, who are imperfect in many respects. Not only that, but as we see in verse 9, His being crowned with glory and honor was directly tied to the fact that He suffered death. Our death is integrally tied with His, just as our glory is integrally tied with His. We must die to self to live to Christ. Suffering in the flesh is tied to victory in the spirit. This is something I find difficult. My flesh enjoys being coddled and spoiled. Just as the body is trained by putting it through the difficulties of intense exercise, so I need to embrace spiritual training which comes by denying the desires of my flesh for comfort and ease in order that I might pursue the advancement of the Kingdom of God.

The other passage in Hebrews that always surprises me is Hebrews 5:7-8 "During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered."

Did I hear that right? Jesus learned obedience from what He suffered? Again, it was not that Jesus was ever disobedient, but in some way, His obedience could not be complete apart from enduring suffering. If that was true for Him, how much more necessary will suffering be for us, who have been disobedient. Surely suffering is also necessary for us to learn obedience. This is yet another valuable gift we derive from suffering.

The Lord has us all in training and preparation for reigning with Him for eternity. This requires us learning obedience. I learned long ago as a parent that you never know the level of obedience a child has until you ask them to do things they do not want to do. If a child is only asked to do things they want to do then their motive is in question. If they obey in something that goes against their desires then their obedience and submission is known. Thus, we can rejoice in the opportunity to demonstrate our love and submission to the Lord through suffering obediently.

Hebrews 10:32-39 says, "Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. For, 'In just a little while, he who is coming will come and will not delay.' And, 'But my righteous one will live by faith. And I take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back.' But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved."

This is a beautiful picture. These people chose to suffer public humiliation, confiscation of their property, imprisonment, and all sorts of persecution gladly, knowing that their reward was greater and eternal. Their confidence will prove well-founded. The promise to them is that if they persevere and do God's will, they will receive what God has promised. Those who shrink back, prove their commitment was empty, and are punished. Those who are faithful are saved with a great and eternal salvation.

We see the same portrait in Moses, described in Hebrews 11:24-26: "By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward."

In China, one of the major house church networks has people who are being baptized take a pledge:

"I am ready at any time and any place to suffer for the Lord.

I am ready at any time and any place to be imprisoned for the Lord.

I am ready at any time and any place to escape for the Lord.

I am ready at any time and any place to die for the Lord."

They are then baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This makes it quite clear from the moment they identify with Him that they understand what it will cost to follow Him and they recognize He is worth it.

If new believers realize that suffering for Christ is normal and expected, then they are far less likely to be confused, or discouraged, or hopeless, or bitter, or angry, when they face that suffering. Suffering for Christ is the normal life of a believer. One measure of God's greatness is that He can strengthen us to endure it, and He can use it for our good and His glory.

Hebrews 11:17-19 tells us, “By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, ‘It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.’ Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.”

The entire chapter is full of examples like this. Of course, we know that at the last moment, God stopped Abraham, and provided a substitute sacrifice. Abraham didn’t know that, however. He trusted that God was good, even though God’s command seemed cruel and heartless and senseless. He was obeying God despite the fact that God’s guidance seemed ridiculous. He assumed it was a test of His love for God, and he was correct.

Jesus said the greatest commandment was to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” (Mark 12:30) He also said, “If you love me, keep my commands.” Thus, our love is demonstrated by our obedience. If we love the Lord with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, then we will obey Him no matter what the cost. It is no test for the Lord to ask things of us that cost us nothing. The test is in His instructions when obedience will result in pain and loss. He often tests us in these ways. Will we obey?

Hebrews 11:32-38 says, “And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.”

Hebrews 11 is called the “hall of faith.” It is interesting that in this list of heroes of the faith, the common factor is not whether their story had a happy ending on earth or not. The common factor is that they all experienced severe trials. In some cases, as in the verses up to women receiving back their dead by resurrection, God miraculously delivered them for His glory. In the verses after that, for some reason, He chose not to deliver them, also for His glory.

You see, God’s great power is demonstrated in the cases where He provided miraculous relief. His worthiness, however, is demonstrated in the cases where people were ready and

willing to pay any price for His sake, and they do so. His true greatness is what explains their willing sacrifice.

One of the best ways, then, to show forth God's glory is for us to face extreme trials. He is glorified through that either way, as long as we remain faithful in the suffering. The other wonderful news is that we then receive eternal reward and joy in His presence. It is truly a "can't lose" scenario.

In Hebrews 12:4-11, the author says, "In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says, 'My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.' Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."

Do you want God's holiness and righteousness? Do you want His peace? Do you want to be strengthened and trained? If so, then you want God's discipline. These are all benefits of God's discipline. When He gives painful discipline, it is evident that we are His children.

Our response is to be that we submit to the discipline, that we respect our Father in heaven for providing it, and that we learn and grow from it. We are to endure it and be grateful for it. God is giving it to us for our own good. He is a good Father and is doing it for our blessing. In this case, the saying is true: "No pain, no gain."

James 1:2-5 says, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."

We see here that the many kinds of difficulties we face have some common results. First, we need to recognize them as tests of our faith. These tests produce a variety of wonderful results. We gain endurance, which perfects us in many other ways, completing our character development. These difficulties then, are what the Lord uses to conform us to the image of Christ.

It is for this reason that James exhorts us to consider it all joy when we face these difficulties. God is developing His character in us, preparing us in every way to be with Him forever in glory. The trials are God's gift to us.

In James 5:10-11, James tells us: "Brothers and sisters, as an example of **patience in the face of suffering**, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we count as **blessed** those who have **persevered**. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen **what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.**"

Job is an example of someone who suffered tremendously, losing everything he owned, his family, and his health, in a most tragic and severe fashion. Then, even his wife and closest friends turned against him despite his righteousness and positive response. In his case, however, the Lord provided comfort and relief during the years of his remaining life upon earth.

The older I get, the more I appreciate the character qualities of patience and perseverance. When I was young, I used to assume that patience and perseverance were a given. Now I respect the character and strength they represent. Patience and perseverance are the responses the Lord is looking for from us when we undergo suffering. These are the qualities He rewards with blessing, compassion, and mercy.

The good news is that each one of us is guaranteed this relief, blessing, compassion and mercy in full measure and forever. We may not see it in this lifetime, but we will definitely reap the rewards in eternity and for eternity.

Glory results from suffering. It will bring glory to God and to us when Jesus returns. In 1 Peter 1:6-7 it says, "In all this you **greatly rejoice**, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that **the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.**"

Our greatest purpose in life is to glorify God. Since suffering for Him accomplishes that, it is a valuable thing. It glorifies Him because it demonstrates the genuineness of our faith and His worthiness to suffer for. He is worth it.

As followers of Christ we rightly give significant attention to worship. Worship is anything that shows the worthiness of God. I value suffering for doing God's will as a tremendous form of worship that will not be available to me in eternity. Therefore, I need to take the opportunity now while I have it.

Finally, we will share in that praise, glory, and honor on that day and for eternity. As Jim Elliot famously said, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

1 Peter 2:19-23 says, “For **this finds favor**, if **for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly**. For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you **do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it**, **this finds favor with God**. For **you have been called for this purpose**, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, **WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously.**”

Twice in this passage we are told that we find favor with God if we suffer unjustly and we patiently endure it. If we do not patiently endure it, presumably there is no benefit. Peter points to Jesus as our example in this. He didn’t complain or threaten or retaliate. Instead He entrusted Himself to God, knowing that in the end, the Father would make everything right.

Enduring unjust suffering, then, is an opportunity to demonstrate Christ-likeness and to please God. This is truly good news. This is yet another example of how short-term difficulty results in long-term blessing. This is the sort of situation that is indeed a cause for rejoicing.

Finally, note that this kind of suffering is essential for us to fulfill our calling. In fact, Peter tells us this is central to our calling, it was for this very purpose, that we would follow Christ’s example in how to suffer well.

In 1 Peter 3:13-17, Peter asks, “Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should **suffer for what is right, you are blessed**. **Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.**’ But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. **But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.** For it is better, if it is God’s will, to **suffer for doing good than for doing evil.**”

In this passage, Peter says we are always to look for opportunities to share the message of the Kingdom, and to do so in a gentle and respectful manner. We are to constantly model irreproachably good behavior. We are to be fearless in the face of threats and attacks. He

notes that sometimes it is God's will for us to suffer for doing what is right. When that happens, we are blessed.

I am reminded of David's behavior toward King Saul. David fearlessly persisted in his exemplary behavior in general and toward Saul in particular. Saul continued to pursue David, seeking to kill him, but in the end, David was blessed. The difficulties were used to test and to prepare David to be greatly blessed and used by the Lord.

In 1 Peter 4:1-2, Peter tells us, "Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin. As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God."

What Peter has in view here is our identification with Christ. He is our forerunner. He is our model. He denied His own desires, comfort, will, and safety, in order to obey God's purposes in all these areas. He did not live for sin but for the heavenly Father.

Sin is anything we think, do, say, or fail to do, think or say that is different from the Father's will. Jesus said what the Father told Him to say and nothing else. He did what the Father guided Him to do and nothing else. In so doing, He perfectly fulfilled the Father's will in and through His life. He reflected the Father.

All this was achieved through Jesus' suffering. We are called to suffer in the same way, denying ourselves, taking up our "cross" daily, and following Him and His example (Luke 9:23). Thus, in a sense, our sanctification, our being conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:28-29), and our being guided into the good works that God prepared beforehand for us to walk in (Ephesians 2:10), are all accomplished through the means of suffering.

1 Peter 4:12-14 says, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you."

We can see from this passage that it is through our sufferings that we can most closely identify with Him. God's presence with us and within us is somehow made more real and substantial when we suffer for Him and because of Him. This is a blessing and a cause for joy.

In some way, we experience Jesus' glory when we suffer for Him. Even more significantly, we will share His future glory when He returns. This is a cause for great rejoicing now and will be a cause for even greater joy when He returns. Peter tells us that this suffering is to be expected. It is normal. We should not be surprised at it. It will come and it will be severe if we are truly following Him. This is a test of our faith. How we respond to it matters. This is part of our seemingly upside-down Kingdom. Rejoice at these fiery ordeals!

1 Peter 5:8-10 tells us, "Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings. And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast."

In other words, God will renew us, strengthen us, and make us strong and persevering by means of the suffering. This is all in preparation for eternity. God is building capabilities and character in us that we will reap the benefits from forever. Specifically, suffering is meant to increase our endurance, character and hope. This relatively short period of suffering gives us eternal blessings.

In order for us to reap these benefits we need to stand firm and resist in faith, faith that God will sustain us and give us these blessings. We can also take heart in the knowledge of how the Lord is sustaining our brothers and sisters around the world by His grace in their sufferings. We can do this only if we are alert and serious. We must pay attention to the intentions of the enemy, resisting him at every turn.

In Revelation 2:10, Jesus says to the church in Smyrna through John, "Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown."

This is another example of how the Lord uses the attacks of the enemy to accomplish His purposes. The church in Smyrna was allowed to suffer, including imprisonment and death. God used it to test them. When they passed the test the Lord would reward them with a victor's crown to wear through all eternity in His presence.

As Psalm 30:5b says, "weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning." This is the encouragement and hope we have, no matter how bitter the trials and tribulations may become. God in His wisdom and mercy turns all of it to our good and His

glory. What the enemy intends for evil, God uses for our good. “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)

Here is a summary of the desired responses we are to have to suffering:
(These are taken from the verses quoted in the blog series.)

Think about God’s perspective on it
Wait for the Lord and rely on Him for relief
Hope in the Lord and seek Him
Quietly submit to the Lord
Humbly respond to the Lord and to the human agents
Do not grumble or complain
Examine our lives
Worship the Lord
Call out to the Lord
Do not fear
Mourn
Commit our lives to a life of difficult service
Do not be distracted from Kingdom purposes
Seek to please the Lord in the midst of it
Act righteously, even when it will result in persecution
Rejoice greatly
Be glad
Do not resist evil people acting against you
Love your enemies
Pray for those who persecute you
Love God more than anyone, including family members
Count the Lord as more important than anything in life
Be willing to sacrifice everything for Christ
Deny your own will and desires and serve Christ’s purposes daily
Do not be selfish or conceited
Humbly consider others as more important than yourself and serve their interests
Do not use your position to your advantage but rather to serve others
Humble yourself by being willing to suffer for others benefit
Be encouraged
Continue proclaiming the good news of Jesus publicly and privately
Continue teaching others about the Kingdom life publicly and privately
Promote the Kingdom wherever you go
Welcome instruction about the Kingdom even when it leads to suffering
Model service despite suffering for other believers

Imitate followers of Christ who suffer well for serving the Lord
Persevere, demonstrate faith, and endure
Be filled with the Spirit
View the trials as identification with Christ and for His sake
Continue to speak the truths of the Kingdom that you have believed
Do not lose heart
Fix your eyes on the unseen and eternal realities rather than your present situation
Do not cause others to stumble
Show great endurance through every kind of unpleasant circumstance and situation
Live out purity, understanding, patience and kindness
Demonstrate a Spirit-filled life of sincere love, truthful speech and godly power
Show forth righteous living in spiritual warfare in the face of any response
Be content with being considered false, being beaten, poor, sorrowful and dying
Work hard for the Kingdom
Be willing to face every kind of difficulty, danger, discomfort, and sorrow
Be concerned for others welfare
Boast in your weakness
Delight in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and difficulties
Glory in your sufferings
Share in Christ's sufferings
Consider yourself to be a sheep to be slaughtered and sacrificed
Be willing to lose your freedom
Count any and every earthly thing as a loss compared to knowing Christ
Participate in Jesus' suffering and death willingly
Intentionally suffer through self-discipline as a sacrifice of service
Seek to please the Lord
Consider your service and sacrifice as the "least you can do"
Die to self with Jesus
Persevere
Practice the Lord's commands
Serve as Christ's ambassador and represent His desires and ways to others
Fervently pray with cries and tears to the Lord for His relief
Reverently submit to God
Remember God's faithfulness in past suffering
Stand with others who are suffering and join them in it
Joyfully accept the confiscation of your property
Live by faith
Do not shrink back from serving or speaking for the Lord
Choose to be mistreated with God's people rather than hiding your citizenship to escape
Value the treasures of God more than the treasures of this world
Embrace any sacrifice the Lord calls on you to make
Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength
Keep God's commands

Welcome and choose every form of opposition and pain and discomfort for God's sake
Resist and struggle against sin, even to death
Do not make light of discipline
Do not lose heart
Endure hardship, knowing its benefits
Respect God and submit to Him
Consider it pure joy
Let endurance have its full result
Be patient and persevere
Bear up under unjust suffering
Patiently endure unjust suffering
Do not commit sin or deceive to escape it.
Do not lash out at those causing you pain
Do not threaten
Entrust yourself to God who will judge righteously
Do not fear threats or be frightened
Revere Christ as Lord
Be prepared to give a witness for your hope, with gentleness and respect
Arm yourself with the purpose to suffer as Christ did and with His attitude
Do not be surprised at fiery ordeals and tests, they are expected and normal
Rejoice at the opportunity to share in Jesus' sufferings
Be alert and of sober mind
Resist the devil, firm in your faith
Be aware that believers around the world are suffering for their faith
Do not be afraid of future suffering
Be faithful to the point of death

Here is a list of benefits of persecution and suffering if we respond well:
(These are taken from the verses quoted in the blog series.)

Position us to bless others
Test and refine and prove us and our faith
Give us hope
Show us God's love is unstoppable and He is good and is all we need
Show us God is listening and is near
Bless us
Comfort us
Equip us to comfort others
Prepare us to inherit the Kingdom of heaven
Increase our reward in heaven
Discover our true and real life in the Lord

Help us know Jesus more intimately
Help us become more like Christ and identify with Him more fully
Help us gain more of Jesus' character
Demonstrate the permanency and power of God's love for us
Save our lives
Cause us to bear more fruit
Teach us peace
Teach us to hope in our future eternal comfort and blessing
Demonstrate God's trust in us and honor of us
Give us joy
Announce God's message broadly
Encourage others in their faith
Show our love to our brothers and sisters in the faith
Shows our worthiness for the Kingdom
Makes room for God's justice
Shows God's power in us
Demonstrates God's life in us
Foreshadows our future glorification (like Jesus' resurrection)
Causes others to be drawn to the Lord
Results in thanksgiving from others for our sacrificial ministry
Renews us day by day through the Lord
Earns eternal reward
Proves our genuineness
Validates our ministry
Validates our words
Makes our lives known
Enriches the lives of others
Shows where our true riches are, where our hearts are
Keeps us humble
Gives us perseverance, godly character, and hope
Honors us
Shows we are God's children and heirs of His glory
Demonstrates our conquering lives in the Lord
Advances the gospel
Gives confidence to fellow-believers
Demonstrates our faith in the Lord, which is our righteousness
Shows us the power of Jesus' resurrection, and helps us share in it
Provides access to Jesus' life and helps us reign with Him in eternity
Gives us strength to stand
Crowns us with glory and honor
Perfects us
Teaches us obedience
Causes the Lord to be especially attentive to our prayers

Enables us to experience better and lasting possessions
Is a pathway to receive God's promises
Is the way of salvation
Shows the world is not worthy but the Lord is
Is an opportunity for amazing victories that will glorify the Lord
Is a way the Lord teaches us discipline
Grows us in holiness
Produces a harvest of righteousness and peace in our lives
Produces endurance and perfects us and makes us complete in the Lord
Enables God to demonstrate His compassion and mercy
Proves the genuineness of our faith
Results in praise, glory and honor to the Lord
Helps us find favor with God
Fulfills our calling
Shames the enemies of the Kingdom
Helps free us from sin's allure
Causes us to live more fully for God's will and desires
Increases our future joy
Increases the glory of God in our lives and the fullness of the Holy Spirit
Will result in our restoration, strengthening, firmness, and steadfastness
Results in our receiving the victor's crown
Achieves God's good purposes in our lives