

SUFFERING UNIQUE TO CHRISTIANS



Everyone suffers. Years ago, I finally realized the universality of suffering. Non-Christians suffer. Christians suffer. Everybody suffers in this life. Therefore, I decided if I was going to suffer anyway, it might as well be for the sake of Jesus and not because of my stupidity, (though I have not been completely successful with that one!)

Suffering for the sake of Christ will ALWAYS be redeemed and rewarded. Sometimes even in this life.

More than that, when suffering is inexplicable, or yes, even when it arises from our foolishness or sin, IF WE BELONG TO CHRIST, God will work that suffering to our eventual good.

With all respect to certain ancient saints of God, some whom seemed to seek out suffering, suffering itself is NOT meritorious. Suffering for suffering's sake does not earn favor with God.

Short of compromising our faith, we should take responsible steps to avoid suffering. Jesus certainly did. He repeatedly took himself out of harms' way – until he knew it was his time.

But suffering is one of God's master tools in the training of our character.

God's number one purpose with us in this life on earth is to TRANSFORM us on the inside so we become the kind of person who can safely be trusted to reign with Jesus forever.

Dr. Dallas Willard, my mentor in the things of Christ, used to put it this way, "The Christian life is one of 'training for reigning.'"

Everybody suffers. However, Christians experience unique kinds of suffering.

BEWILDERMENT.

"Why hast thou forsaken me?" This cry of Jesus on the cross at times becomes our own. Since we have given ourselves to God, to save, guide, and protect us, inexplicable suffering and tragedy can stop us dead in our tracks in stunned disbelief. Yet, though we do not understand why, God can still be trusted.

CHASTENING BY THE LORD.

"As many as I love I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent." This verse from Revelation speaks to the mysterious way in which God uses our troubles to correct us and discipline us. These trials are to get our attention, cause us to consider our ways, and bring us back to God.

CONFLICT WITHIN THE FAMILY.

It was not for nothing that Jesus said if anyone would follow him, he must come first, even before wife, husband, parents, and children. Over the years, I have known a number of married individuals (usually women) who came to church alone and at cost to themselves.

AVOIDED BY OTHERS.

I remember when I surrendered my life to Jesus; I assumed my friends would be happy for me. They were not. In fact, one "friend" in particular said to me directly that if I was not willing to party along with them anymore, I was not welcome to be with them. That hurt.

BEING MISUNDERSTOOD.

The follower of Jesus dances to a different tune than do those in the world. We mean no harm, only good – yet others not motivated by the love of God cannot discern our motivation. Kindness may be interpreted as weakness, building others up can be seen as "sucking up," and giving money may be seen as foolish waste.

It hurts to be misunderstood, especially when there is no fixing it.

A classic misunderstanding from the early Church was the whispered rumor among the Romans that Christians were cannibals. They understood Christians to gather in secret, eat someone's body, and drink his blood!

MISTREATED FOR OUR FAITH.

Martyrdom is the ancient and contemporary fate of many followers of Jesus, who himself was executed for his obedience to God. The Bible says clearly, "Everyone who wishes to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." That is unavoidable.

We do not seek antagonism, but should not be surprised when it comes, though in our witnessing we meant no harm at all.

The Apostle Peter wrote, "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."

HEARTACHE FOR THE LOST.

There are times I feel sick to my stomach at the thought of people, especially those I care about personally, possibly winding up in hell. How many hours have been spent agonizing in prayer for the salvation of those we love? If this heartache is not a form of suffering, I do not know what is.

HURTING FOR GOD'S LOSS OF REPUTATION AMONG UNBELIEVERS.

How do you feel when someone uses God's name in vain? Do you not hurt inside? When I hear God blamed for evil – or cursed – or mocked – I feel personally upset. I love God. Yes, there are times I want him to just come down and smite some folks! However, in my better moments, I want God vindicated publicly, loved, and praised.

FRUSTRATION AT THE TEMPORARY TRIUMPH OF EVIL.

The Christian, maybe more than anyone else, feels frustration, and real anger, when evil seems

to be in the ascendant. We know victory is coming. We know people do not have to do the evil they choose to do. We know eventually Jesus will return and make all things right.

We have been given a foretaste of heaven and so we hunger for more. Sometimes that makes it even worse. We KNOW the evil is temporary and the best is yet to come. Along these lines is a favorite verse of mine, “The darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.”

HEARTSICK LONGING FOR GOD.

If you have ever been in love, you know how thoughts and emotions are just fixated towards the beloved. In a similar way, the spiritual presence of God absolutely RUINS the believer for anything else.

There is no state of consciousness more wonderful, sublime, and healing than in the anointing of the Holy Spirit. True, sometimes we go long periods of time without the sensation of God’s presence – but our heart never forgets it.

It is a form of pain to be without God in this way. No wonder Jesus often invited others do you come to him in terms their hunger or thirst for God.

ENDURING DEMONIC PRESSURE.

When you walk in reasonable consistency with the Lord, especially if you are openly bearing witness to Jesus, you may at times experience sensations of heaviness, or unusual weariness, or dread, or confusion, unexpected conflict with others, or chaotic circumstances. I have learned to just keep going, giving God praise.

Evil spirits have been stirred up but they can only harass, not stop you. It is unpleasant, but that is part of the cost in following Jesus. In an odd way, it signals to me that God is doing something significant.

One of my seminary professors once made the startling statement to the class, “If God is in something, it will NOT be smooth.”

His point being that the devil will try to disrupt what God is doing. You need not fear the devil – he is under the feet of Jesus and YOU are in Jesus – so the devil is under YOUR feet as well. This is what Jesus meant, I believe, when he told his disciples, “I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you.”

AGONIZING OVER SIN BECAUSE OF A HEIGHTENED CONSCIENCE.

Before you were converted, you probably only felt bad about wrongdoing when you were caught and suffered for it. Not so anymore. Your conscience has been enlightened by the Holy Spirit and is far more sensitive. Feelings of personal failure can be quite painful now.

You learn to keep short accounts with God and others about sin – and you learn to be very grateful to Jesus for continuing forgiveness!

FEELING ABANDONED WHEN GOD IS NOT SPEAKING.

Over the years, I have learned to recognize the voice of God when he speaks into my spirit. However, I have had the experience when, for over a year, I did not hear God speak at all. Nothing but silence. It was not because of sin. It was not because I wasn’t listening or was not in prayer.

It felt to me as if I had been abandoned. I was so discouraged I seriously thought about quitting as a Christian. However, I found I could not quit. I discovered that being a Christian was not something I did – it was what I had become. So I am grateful for that year of pain – but I sure do not want to go through it again.

GRIEVING THE LOSS OF THINGS GIVEN UP FOR THE SAKE OF JESUS.

Do you not think Abraham was in grief when he prepared to sacrifice Isaac, the most important thing in his life, except for God? Do you not think God the Father grieved at the suffering of his Son? As you follow Jesus, you will be called upon to choose. Will it be God – or – money? God or time? God or reputation? God or belongings? God or persons?

There is grief in the loss of things dear to us, even though a more than compensating satisfaction comes from having chosen what is best.

BEARING WITH LACK OF VISIBLE “FRUIT” IN YOUR SERVICE TO GOD.

Most pastors are mentally prepared for God to call them to a thriving, growing congregation. Few expect, since they have sacrificed their own worldly possibilities of success, that God would call them to a place where they would find little results for their labor. The prophet Jeremiah spent his entire life giving forth the Word of God – and NOTHING came of it – except his reward in the next life. Jesus does not call us with promises of success. He calls us to come and die – to lay down our lives. He calls us to obedience. He says simply, “Come, follow me.”

BEARING WITH LOSS OF STANDING, POPULARITY, WORLDLY PROMINENCE.

I was THRILLED God would use me, of all people, in the gospel ministry. However, I will admit to you, when I was in my mid-30’s struggling financially as a pastor, and many of my close friends had nice cars, homes, and money in the bank, I felt some amount of envy. I eventually got over it, but at the time, there was a sense of loss for having obeyed a call into ministry. When you give up certain worldly accomplishments and pleasures for the sake of Jesus, there will be some pain. It is worth it though.

GIVING UP THE SATISFACTION OF TAKING MATTERS INTO YOUR OWN HANDS.

Worldly people are used to taking action on their own behalf. That makes perfect sense to them. Who else is going to look after their interests? But we who follow Jesus learn restraint. Many times, we are NOT to take matters into our own hands. Many times faith REQUIRES we wait on God.

Years ago, a Christian counselor told me “It is far more important to choose what satisfies than what is pleasurable.” He was right.

BEARING WITH THE DELAY OF GOD’S JUSTICE ON YOUR BEHALF.

This waiting on God – particularly when you are the victim of injustice – is quite painful. However, God has told us in the Bible, “Do not take revenge my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written, ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord.”

Those in the world seek their vengeance. We who follow Jesus forgive those who have injured us – and we wait on God to execute judgment if that needs to happen.

There is nothing wrong in pursuing legal avenues to address injustice. Sometimes faithfulness to Jesus REQUIRES we do so. But on a personal basis, we leave “pay-back” to God.

FEELING NO LONGER USEFUL FOR THE KINGDOM.

I will never forget the sadness expressed by an elderly man in my first congregation when he said to me one day, “God has put me on a shelf.” He had been a Sunday School teacher and Deacon all his adult life. Serving the Lord had been of enormous satisfaction to him. Yet his health had deteriorated and he could no longer actively serve in those ways. It was a great source of grief to him.

TEDIUM FOR THE ELDERLY WHO WAIT FOR GOD “TO CALL ME HOME.”

I recommend visiting in a nursing home. For me it brings a good perspective to my own complaints!

I cannot count the number of dear Christians I have visited in nursing homes who were just waiting for God to take them home to heaven. Not just the physical suffering, confusion, or loneliness – but the suffering of tedium experienced as they wait to die. “Why doesn’t the Lord just take me home?” is a cry I have heard many times.

CONCLUSION.

God has not abandoned you. God has not forgotten you. God is with you. He WILL bring you through your suffering.

There are many questions you and I will only find answered in the next life. However, we can trust God to work all things for our good. The question comes to us all: will we trust and obey only if we understand?

Let God have his full and complete work in and with you, yielding to him and praising him. Anyone can praise God when they win the Super Bowl. But can you praise God in the midst of your suffering? I believe that is when God receives the most glory.