

THE SUFFERING OF CHRIST AND HIS SAINTS

Then He said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?” ²⁷ And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. (Luke 24:25-27)

No discussion of Godly suffering should begin at any place other than the Lord Jesus Himself. His suffering is unique, in that it achieved salvation for mankind, something no-one else could have been remotely worthy to accomplish. Yet in addition, His suffering is a pattern - an example for those who would follow Him, and an overture to the great symphony of His people.

The sufferings of Christ were also the prelude to His glory, and in this regard, it gives us great hope in our tribulations, that we might also share in His glory in the ages to come:

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:1-2)

...and again:

Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, ¹¹ searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. (1 Peter 1:10-11)

Peter speaks of this hope in his first epistle, and summarizes this great purpose of our suffering, indicating it to be a sharing in the sufferings of Christ, and that it is indeed a great blessing, something which we should exult and rejoice in:

Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; ¹³ but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. ¹⁴ If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.^[d] On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified. ¹⁵ But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters. ¹⁶ Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter. (1 Peter 4:12-16)

...And Paul also writes to the Romans of how these trials and tribulations shall find their end in great glory, as these very sufferings bring the sons of God into come into their own, being ultimately revealed in the power of their full adoption:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. ¹⁹ For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. (Romans 8:18-19)

These sufferings are for the purpose of bringing us into the likeness of Jesus Christ, even as a furnace is for the purpose of molding, shaping, purifying and refining, and Paul rejoiced in this knowledge, treasuring it above all the world has to offer:

But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. ⁸ Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; ¹⁰ that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, ¹¹ if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:7-11)

These tribulations are also unavoidable, if one would follow Christ to the full, for He Himself promised as much:

These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)

...and again:

And Jesus answered and said to them: "Take heed that no one deceives you. ⁵ For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many. ⁶ And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all^[a] these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. ⁷ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences,^[b] and earthquakes in various places. ⁸ All these are the beginning of sorrows. ⁹ "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake. ¹⁰ And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. ¹¹ Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. ¹² And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. (Matthew 24:4-12)

...and it is these very sufferings that are a vital prelude into entering the fullness of the kingdom, as Luke writes of in the book of Acts:

And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, ²² strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God." (Acts 14:21-22)

Not that this exhortation of the need for suffering was strengthening to the souls of the disciples! It is something the follower of Christ needs to hear and be encouraged in. We do not

seek out suffering and tribulation, in the spirit of a self-flagellating monk, but we do well to understand that such trials are promised to us, and we should not lose heart when they find us in due season.

THE FELLOWSHIP OF TRIBULATION

The Koine Greek word for tribulation is θλίψις, which has a sense of constriction and internal pressure, as if one were hemmed in, and we can draw a clear parallel to the difficult gate and path mentioned by Christ:

Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it. (Matthew 7:14)

We can see how this constriction is a necessity for all believers, and that we therefore have a fellowship in the same. Along these lines, it is interesting to note how John introduces himself in Revelation, as he puts an emphasis upon suffering, and how this tribulation is something the body of Christ all have their share in:

I, John, both your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. (Revelation 1:9)

What an interesting manner of introduction! One might expect him to be a companion in the ‘glory, power and might’ of Jesus Christ, or something equally impressive, but instead, we see both tribulation and patience in the companionship. The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews touches upon this theme too, reminding his audience of their tribulations, and their fellowship with others who were suffering likewise, all of which was accepted and embraced with joy:

But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings: ³³ partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated; ³⁴ for you had compassion on me^[h] in my chains, and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven. (Hebrews 10:32-34)

Indeed, Paul saw the gospel itself as an inevitable means of suffering, and exhorted Timothy to join him in the race of endurance:

Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God... (2 Timothy 1:8)

Most of all, this fellowship of suffering is with the Lord Himself, as we follow His example and willingly receive the same troubles that He did:

Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. ¹³ Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach. ¹⁴ For here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come. (Hebrews 13:12-14)

These tribulations are not without purpose, and there is a focus and faith demanded in the midst of them. It is the reproach of Christ we are bearing, and we are going forth to the one who was cast out, as outcasts ourselves:

“If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you...” (John 15:18)

This fellowship with Christ and His suffering is ultimately a picture of the opposition between the Spirit of Christ and the spirit of world. One cannot abide in both spirits, and if one follows Christ, the hatred from the world will follow in due time.

THE FRUIT OF TRIBULATION AND EXAMPLE OF CHRIST

Now then, all of our sufferings in Christ bear fruit. First of all, as said above, they refine us into the image of Christ and character of God, even as gold is purified. This is a cause for much rejoicing, as Paul intimates to the Romans”

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have^[a] peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. ³ And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; ⁴ and perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵ Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us. (Romans 5:1-5)

These trials also enable us to encourage others when we have received the encouragement of God, and to help others through their own trials even as we have been helped through ours:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. ⁵ For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ. ⁶ Now if we are afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer. Or if we are comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation. ⁷ And our hope for you is steadfast, because we know that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also you will partake of the consolation. (2 Corinthians 1:3-7)

These sufferings also enable us to learn obedience, even as Christ did in some mysterious way, though indeed already obedient:

...who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard

because of His godly fear, ⁸ though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. (Hebrews 5:7-8)

If the very Lord Himself had to suffer, with no alternative route away from drinking that cup, why should we expect anything but the same, if we are truly following in His footsteps? His suffering stands as an example and inspiration to His own people:

For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings. (Hebrews 2:10)

...and indeed, he is not just an example of the need for suffering, but a blessed pattern for patient endurance under the same, showing Himself gentle and loving throughout the course of His trials:

For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps:

²² **“Who committed no sin,
Nor was deceit found in His mouth”;** ^[h]

²³ **who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; ²⁴ who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed. ²⁵ For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer^[i] of your souls. (1 Peter 2:21-25)**

This example of the Lord Himself is for our hope and encouragement, strengthening us to look towards the one who has already overcome all things, and endured patiently and lovingly. His tribulation will bear fruit forever, and we can be confident that we shall also bear fruit, if we abide in Him in the midst of all our trials.

THE HOPE OF TRIBULATION:

The purpose of this article has not been to get into specifics regarding the various types of suffering and tribulation one must undergo. For we know that God appoints a path to every man, and places different trials upon it. Rather, these things are written as an overview of godly suffering itself, and the great hope that is contained therein. It must also be emphasized that we do not suffer all of the time, but that there are times and seasons of greater or lesser troubles, for there is a time for everything under the sun. It would be a mistake to seek out strife and tribulation, as opposed to awaiting those times when it comes upon us according to the timing and will of the divine Father. There are times of great refreshment and exhilaration in life in addition to times of trouble, and we can embrace both with joy if our eyes are upon God and His Christ.

In closing, there can be few better ways to sum up the great hope in the midst of tribulation, and the incredible joy and glory that shall follow, than by turning to the book of Revelation, and

seeing the vision of the overcoming saints given to John, who were seen to be rejoicing in God and His Christ:

After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

¹¹ All the angels stood around the throne and the elders and the four living creatures, and fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² saying:

**“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom,
Thanksgiving and honor and power and might,
Be to our God forever and ever.
Amen.”**

¹³ Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, “Who are these arrayed in white robes, and where did they come from?”

¹⁴ And I said to him, “Sir, you know.”

So he said to me, “These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵ Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple. And He who sits on the throne will dwell among them. ¹⁶ They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat; ¹⁷ for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters.^[c] And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (Revelation 7:9-17)

Amen!