

Suffering and God's Comfort

***“Blessed be God,
even the Father of
our Lord Jesus
Christ, the Father
of mercies, and the
God of all comfort;
Who comforteth
us in all our
tribulation, that
we may be able to
comfort them
which are in any
trouble, by the
comfort wherewith
we ourselves are
comforted of
God. For as the
sufferings of Christ
abound in us, so
our consolation
also aboundeth
by Christ.”
—II Corinthians
1:3-5***

ALTHOUGH IT IS BEYOND our capacity as humans to comprehend the emotions of our Heavenly Father, we are assured from the Scriptures that he has the capacity for suffering and experiencing pain. “In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them: in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; and he bare them, and carried them all the days of old.”—Isa. 63:9

The fact that Adam disobeyed God by partaking of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden undoubtedly was a source of grief to the all-wise Creator. Thus, he made provision for mankind's eventual recovery from sin

through the Lamb that was “slain from the foundation of the world.” (Rev. 13:8) Indeed, God “so loved the world” that he sent his “only begotten Son” as a means of facilitating everlasting life for the condemned human race. (John 3:16) This act reflects his unfathomable compassion. Additionally, as he looked down upon the cross as his crucified Son cried out “it is finished,” surely God suffered greatly.

THE BURDEN OF LEADERSHIP

Numerous Old Testament servants of God suffered severely. As a class, the Scriptures provide a general description as to what some of them endured. “Others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented.”—Heb. 11:36,37

As one of the Heavenly Father’s servants, Moses was called of God to lead the children of Israel from Egyptian servitude into Canaan. In Egypt, as a people, they had suffered for an extensive period of time. Along with his brother Aaron, he explained to the Jews that God had looked upon their affliction and deliverance was promised. With the support of the elders of Israel, and God’s assurance that he would accomplish his purpose, Moses must have been rather surprised when Pharaoh not only would not allow the Israelites to go and celebrate a feast in the wilderness, but ultimately would cause the foremen of the Israelites to be beaten because they failed to have the people make their same daily quota of bricks after the king decided they would no longer be given

straw for this purpose. (Exod. 4:28-5:14) Confused and bewildered, Moses “returned unto the LORD, and said, Lord, wherefore hast thou so evil entreated this people? why is it that thou hast sent me? For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in thy name, he hath done evil to this people; neither hast thou delivered thy people at all.”—chap. 5:22,23

Eventually, after a series of plagues which came upon the Egyptians, Moses led the Israelites to safety through the Red Sea into the wilderness of Shur. When they came to Marah, there was water there but it was too bitter to drink, and the people murmured against Moses. God then gave instructions to Moses for sweetening the water by casting a tree into it so that it was palatable. (chap. 15:22-25) By this time it must have been clear to him he was going to have many, many difficulties in dealing with the Israelites. The Scriptures indicate some of the trials he endured during the forty year period of wilderness wanderings, although not every instance of the Israelites’ rebellious spirit is noted in the Bible.

In Numbers 13 and 14, as the Israelites came near to Canaan, twelve scouts were sent to spy out the land. Except for Joshua and Caleb, the other ten lacked faith and said that invading it would be too dangerous, and defeat on their part would be certain. They began to murmur against Moses and Aaron, entered into a conspiracy, and determined that they would select another captain to lead them back to Egypt. God was displeased, and he told Moses he was going to send a plague to destroy them. We see the nobility of Moses, however, who prayed for the Israelites to be spared. Ultimately, the Heavenly Father heeded Moses’ petition, but because the

people had disobeyed him so often, he indicated that for forty years they would wander in the desert, until all those adults who refused to go into the land were dead. He would take their children in, and Joshua and Caleb, who gave the good report, would also enter Canaan.

Numbers 20:7-13 records the sin of Moses when he failed to speak to the rock as God commanded, but on the contrary smote it a second time. This, while having antitypical significance, resulted in his being denied permission to enter the Promised Land. Disobedience to God's commands can never be justified. We wonder, however, whether the accumulated weight of the Israelites' murmuring against him for so many years may have been a contributing factor in this meek servant's gross error in presuming to bring forth the water on his own terms, instead of rendering faithful obedience to the Heavenly Father.

GOD'S SPECIAL CARE FOR HIS SAINTS

"Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him." (Ps. 103:13) In considering this text, what a blessed perspective we can gain as we look upon how much our Heavenly Father cares for our every interest. The Lord's consecrated people live all over the globe. When floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes or other natural disasters strike, brethren generally make inquiries as to what is the situation among the friends who live in areas decimated by some of these circumstances. How thankful we are that, in most instances, the report comes back that the brethren were not affected adversely.

Although difficult experiences come upon the Lord's people, God never leaves nor forsakes us. (Heb. 13:5) If we abide in him, however, he will overrule in our lives whatever befalls us for our highest spiritual welfare, in accordance with his eternal purpose for us as New Creatures.

As believers, we have been accepted as sons of God through Christ Jesus. However, we must be aware of our fleshly defects and inability to do his will perfectly. Our failure in so many areas might be cause for discouragement, were it not for the Scriptural testimony that we have a unique standing with the Father. He does not cast us away simply because of our imperfections. "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit." (Rom. 8:1) How precious is this assurance!

PAUL'S SUFFERINGS

Following his dramatic conversion in becoming a follower of Christ, the Lord informed Ananias that the Apostle Paul would endure much suffering for his sake. (Acts 9:16) Paul later recounts some of the experiences he encountered throughout his ministry. "Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I am more; in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the

sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches.”—II Cor. 11:23-28

As a result of his zeal for the Lord, Paul encountered much opposition from the Jews, who sought to take his life. However, because it was God’s will for him to witness in Rome, he survived a perilous journey, including a violent storm and shipwreck, as he traveled with other passengers towards his ultimate destination. Because of divine providence, there was no loss of life among any who sailed with him. (Acts 27:21-26,39-44) In view of his faithfulness to God throughout the severity of his many difficult experiences, Paul was able to declare near the end of his Christian sojourn that a “crown of righteousness” awaited him, as well as for others whose lives gave evidence of complete devotion to God.—II Tim. 4:7,8

CHRIST’S EXAMPLE

The sufferings of Christ commenced immediately after his baptism at the Jordan River, when he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. Apparently, the Lord was so absorbed in meditation, study, and prayer that he fasted forty days and forty nights, during which the Scriptures were opened to him and he received instruction and guidance from the Heavenly Father. At the close of this period, when Jesus was physically weakened and hungry, the devil presented three temptations in an attempt to ensnare him. In each instance he resisted the Adversary and subsequently was ministered to by

the angels. (Matt. 4:1-11) The Master proved victorious in his initial series of trials and testings!

Throughout his ministry, Jesus experienced much reproach, opposition, and rejection. However, he always bore them willingly and patiently as part of God's will for his New Creature development. One attack upon his character which Jesus endured related to his casting out a demon from a victim who was mute. Despite this wonderful feat, some of Christ's opponents attributed his ability to cast out the evil spirit to the power of Beelzebub, the prince of demons. (Luke 11:14-18) It would be absurd to suppose that Satan was opposing his own underlings by using his power to cast them out. Additionally, other Jews had also cast out devils. (vs. 19) Whatever source of power Jesus utilized would also be employed by others engaged in this work. Since there was no condemnation of anyone else for performing the same act, this was another example of unjust treatment which the Master endured.

The doing of his Father's will caused Jesus to be totally consumed and physically spent. Day after day he walked upon dusty roads preaching, teaching, healing, and enduring the opposition and "contradiction of sinners." (Heb. 12:3) An aspect of his suffering to be considered was the weariness that was his portion because of such a demanding regimen.

The Master's final hours in the flesh contained many examples of personal anguish. Some of these included the inability of his disciples to remain awake while he prayed in Gethsemane; his betrayal by Judas; Peter's denial of him; the all-night buffetings and abuse endured during the civil and religious trials to which he was subjected; his need

for assistance in bearing the cross to Golgotha because of diminished physical stamina; and the jeers and taunting voiced towards him while hanging on the cross. He suffered much for all of us.

OUR SUFFERINGS

“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.” (Rom. 12:1,2) This passage of Scripture implies the doing of God’s will is going to cost us something if our consecration is sincere. When we do not follow the ways of our former friends and no longer engage in activities with them of an earthly nature, they may criticize us. This may initially hurt our feelings because we no longer receive their approval. On other occasions, we may have to push ourselves to go to the meetings when we are tired, but we go anyway in order to be a blessing and receive a blessing, “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is.”—Heb. 10:25

Some of the Lord’s dear ones also suffer from their family’s opposition to the Truth and are ostracized on this account by their relatives. Some are suffering from physical ailments, but still persevere in witnessing to the Truth despite limitations of vitality. If one were unable to get to meetings, but spent time reading Scriptures, listening to discourses, praying for other brethren, or doing something else related to the Truth, it undoubtedly would

take extra effort and perhaps aggravate one's physical condition. However, that clearly would be an example of suffering for righteousness.

Another form of suffering may be caused by a misunderstanding between brethren which is very difficult to resolve. As painful as that may be, we need to pray for each other fervently and ask for God's overruling in such matters, while looking for evidence of his leadings.

Some of the Lord's people suffer because of trials peculiar to child-raising. It is hard enough to give children in general, proper guidance during this evil time in which we live. For those who are Spirit begotten, however, the balance between letting young ones grow up normally, while at the same time setting before them the principles of righteousness, can be especially challenging. This is especially true when one's son or daughter is taunted by peers or classmates, being deemed as having a peculiar religion. As adults, we should expect to experience rejection or ridicule, but when our offspring is subjected to such treatment, it is a source of great pain for both parent and child.

LESSONS FROM SUFFERINGS

As New Creatures who have been baptized into Christ's death, we should expect to have suffering and distress. (Rom. 6:3-6) A scriptural basis for our understanding of the benefits we derive therefrom is found in these words: "Not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; And patience, experience; and experience, hope." (Rom. 5:3,4) It is necessary for us to develop the fruits and graces of the Spirit. These qualities

are not developed overnight, or without adversity. Those who prove more than overcomers will take only their character with them beyond the veil. We will be in that condition for eternity, possessed of the divine nature. Therefore, our Heavenly Father will not grant immortality to any being that is deficient in any aspect of the Lord's Spirit.

"It became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings." (Heb. 2:10) Our Heavenly Father ordained there should be a sympathetic high priest class who would serve as ministers of reconciliation during Christ's glorious reign. The collective experiences of the footstep followers of the Master in this present life will give them the wisdom to deal effectively with mankind in God's kingdom. There will be no trials or difficulties which have fallen upon mankind that will be foreign to the experience of the body of Christ.

"I will turn my hand upon thee, and purely purge away thy dross, and take away all thy tin." (Isa. 1:25) This text is written concerning natural Israel, but could be applied prophetically also to the Gospel Age spiritual Israelites. The thought of purging is found elsewhere in the Bible. For example, Malachi 3:3 speaks of purging the sons of Levi "as gold and silver" during the day of the Lord. As we are inspected by the Great Refiner, he permits experiences to come upon us that will solidify righteousness in our being and eradicate any vestiges of iniquity.

"If we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world." (I Cor. 11:31,32) Self-examination and

self-discipline are essential aspects related to keeping our sacrifice on the altar. We need to use initiative in self-correction, so that through the exercise of our free will, we can demonstrate to the Lord our serious endeavors to be faithful. Prayers for spiritual guidance are always in order also, and to the degree that we set a proper example in our conduct, we can be a help to our brethren in their walk.

Paul admonished, "Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord." (Eph. 5:19) Our sufferings should evoke a sense of praise in our hearts that we might be permitted to endure hardship and distress for the cause of Christ. Our mind reflects upon the fact that Paul and Silas, having been beaten with stripes and put into stocks at a jail in Philippi, were able to sing praises so loudly at midnight that the prisoners heard them. (Acts 16:19-25) What an inspiring example for us and a reminder that our ability to praise our Creator under all circumstances must certainly merit his approval.

If we are grieved with the sinful conditions in this world which surround us, and if we are touched by the plight of the untold millions who are suffering, have no sense of hope, and know not God, we above all should desire the kingdom and its blessings to come soon. The Bride class will not be complete until 144,000 individuals have finished their course of sacrifice and suffering. For those of us who have been called and chosen, let us rejoice in the privilege of suffering with our Lord willingly, even unto death, for that is the only way to complete the body of Christ and end earth's weary night of sin, suffering, and death.

HOW GOD PROVIDES COMFORT

Whatever may be our sufferings, the Bible assures us that our Heavenly Father cares and is solicitous of our needs. "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it." (I Cor. 10:13, *New International Version*) The means whereby we may be comforted in the midst of suffering include providential overruling, hymns, Scriptures which contain precious promises, guardian angels that may intervene if we are in harm's way, as well as the Holy Spirit which enables us to comprehend and appreciate God's tender mercies towards us.

A merciful provision available to Spirit-begotten believers is access to the Heavenly Father through prayer. God is keenly aware of the difficulties associated with the Christian sojourn. As a means of providing us with the needed strength to ease our burdens and to receive grace to help in time of need, we are encouraged to approach God in personal communion to obtain guidance and comfort. "When thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee."—Matt. 6:6

Another aspect of God's comfort to consecrated believers is the ecclesia arrangement, whereby we can receive support and encouragement from fellow members of the body of Christ, thus enhancing our spiritual growth and development. Throughout the Christian age, brethren around the globe have

profited from their studies of the Scriptures with others of like precious faith for mutual edification. “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious oil upon the head, running down on the beard, the beard of Aaron, running down on the edge of his garments.” (Ps. 133:1,2, *New King James Version*) Although Internet and telephone meetings were not in the mind of the psalmist when this verse was penned, those who might be otherwise isolated today have the benefit of this provision. What a blessing is the availability of technology for a godly purpose when we note how it is misused by so many others for reasons that do not glorify God.

Summarizing our lesson, let us ever bear in mind that God is not indifferent to the sufferings of his people, or the world of mankind at large who have not yet come into a covenant relationship with him. The Scriptures indicate the Ancient Worthies suffered for righteousness and served as wonderful examples of faithfulness for us to emulate during our Christian sojourn. God’s providence allows adversity upon his prospective divine family while in the flesh as a means of demonstrating our obedience and crystallizing our characters.

The Heavenly Father also provides needed grace and various forms of comfort to sustain us through what otherwise might seem to be unbearable trials. May we appreciate his wisdom in permitting us to endure necessary lessons that will equip us for future service as part of that sympathetic priesthood that will help restore mankind to perfection during that glorious kingdom reign. ■