

#84 “The Refiner’s Fire: Sanctification Through Suffering”

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There is a serious misconception that is becoming increasingly widely held within evangelical circles which teaches that, as believers, we have the right on this earth to have freedom from sickness, financial struggle, and, in fact, struggle and suffering of almost any kind and any nature. This position and line of thinking is so contrary to the full counsel of Scripture that I can only marvel at how and why followers of Christ would believe it. Yet they do, having been deceived. It is true that in Christ we have every spiritual blessing (Ephesians 1:3) and the privilege of being seated at the right hand of God (Ephesians 2:6). In Christ, we are healed...spiritually, from the greatest sickness of all, sin and the wages thereof, namely death (see 1 Peter 2:24). Though it is true Christ healed many, many people during His earthly ministry, it is also true that this was not the main thrust of His kingdom message. His message was to repent for the kingdom of God is at hand (Matthew 3:2). It wasn't that man no longer has to worry about being poor or sick; rather, Jesus' message was that, though in this life we will have trial and tribulation, we ought not to fear, worry, or lose hope because He has overcome this world (see John 16:33). A true kingdom focus accepts that life on this earth is imperfect because the world is fallen (Romans 3:23, 8:22, Genesis 3:17), and such a mindset looks forward to the hope that is yet to come. *The problem with much of the teaching of today is that it is extremely focused on what God can do for me in this life rather than what I should be doing for God in light of the life to come.* Temporary blessing which comes to be defined as health, wealth, and prosperity comes to replace true spiritual blessing of holiness, freedom from sin, and the privilege of storing up treasure in heaven. This life is so short when compared to eternity, and eternity, not what rust and moths can destroy (Matthew 6:19-20), ought to be our single focus and driving hope (see 1 Peter 1:13).

The Biblical writers had no problem understanding that suffering was normal in this life. Jesus had said that His followers would be persecuted for righteousness' sake (Mark 13:13). In fact, persecution itself is to be considered a blessing because it is an honor to suffer for the name of Christ (Matthew 5:10). Paul spoke in 1 Corinthians 4 of this present suffering being relatively insignificant when compared to eternity to come (see 1 Corinthians 4:16-18). He suffered greatly, being beaten, shipwrecked, stuck out in the cold, stoned, imprisoned, and eventually beheaded for Christ's sake (2 Corinthians 11:23-28). This man knew suffering. Even when he had the privilege of experiencing profound heavenly visions (2 Corinthians 12:1-6), God ordained and allowed a minister of Satan to torment and buffet him. God knew that Paul needed this to keep him humble so that he would not exalt himself (2 Corinthians 12:7). So we see that suffering is both normal in the life of the believer, and it has potential refining and sanctifying qualities. Therefore, let us not suppose that suffering in this life is merely something due to a Christian lacking faith, but let us come to understand and believe that God has a plan and purpose in ordaining suffering for us in this life.

The great part is that He doesn't leave us in the dark as to what some of His purposes might be. James 1:2-4 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." Scripture does not say if we encounter trials but *when*. Trials will happen. Jesus experienced them, even having to die unjustly for our eternal blessing. Paul experienced them, the disciples experienced them, and we also will experience them. Why are we surprised? Peter tells his brothers and sisters whom he loves in 1 Peter 4:12, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you." We ought not to be surprised at difficulties and suffering in our lives. When it happens, we can be sure that God knows what is going on, that He is sovereign over our circumstances, and that He will cause all things to work for our good (Romans 8:28). But suffering will happen, and it is in suffering that we must learn, as Paul did, that God's grace is sufficient and that His strength is perfected when we are weak (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). *Suffering is not a sign of weakness; rather, it helps us to see our weakness.* It is only when we come to see, believe, accept, and embrace that we are helpless and weak apart from Christ that Christ can truly fill us, use us, and make us strong in His name for His kingdom purposes. It is suffering that produces character, endurance, and hope. Romans 5:3-5 says, "And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us." If we want to be happy, we must not think that money, health, or earthly prosperity will bring it. It is the love of God alone that can meet our deepest longings and needs such that, even when we are in the midst of great trial, we can still have joy. Trials are not evil, pain is not necessarily bad, and suffering can be for our good. In fact, those who suffer have a great opportunity by faith to be refined unto the likeness of Christ as their weaknesses and impurities come to the surface so that the Refiner can purify their souls. Furthermore, as we see God continue to provide and strengthen us to do His will even under great duress, our faith grows such that we are able to keep believing and keep obeying even better than before.

So let us fix our eyes entirely on eternity, our spiritual blessings in Christ, and the great rewards that are to come. Suffering has its place and purpose here so that we look forward to eternity and live in light of eternal priorities now. My prayer is that, where necessary, God would allow suffering into our lives so that we can be refined to His glory. It is a tough prayer, but it is a safe prayer because God is good, faithful, and true. Lord, we are Yours; make us more like Jesus, whatever it takes. Amen.