



"The Word of God never yet prospered in the world without opposition."

—Iain Murray

**30-Aug-13**

## **A Look at Christian Suffering (Part Two)**

The word "suffering" probably means something a little different to each of us, based on our own experiences and perhaps on our fears. Most likely, somewhere in our minds is the thought of a violent martyrdom somewhat akin to what Jesus, the apostles, and prophets experienced. However, when we look at the way "suffering" is used in Scripture, we see that it includes much more than a final stand for one's [faith](#) before death.

Suffering can be made up of things like rejection, opposition, and being treated with contempt. It can include various forms of abuse and neglect. It can consist of hunger, thirst, and other forms of deprivation. Paul speaks of being hard-pressed, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down. Suffering can encompass being spitefully used, imprisoned, and worn down. It can include all the futility that is in the creation as it groans and awaits the refreshing by its Creator.

When suffering is spoken of in a New Testament context, it is predominantly used to describe what believers experience on account of their beliefs. In particular, it is used to depict the often-painful consequences the apostles endured in striving to preach [the gospel](#) to [the world](#) and to the church. [II](#)

[Corinthians 11:22-29](#) gives a brief record of what Paul suffered in his apostolic duties, including beatings, imprisonments, stonings, being shipwrecked, being in peril in every imaginable way, as well as weariness, sleeplessness, hunger, thirst, cold, and nakedness.

Few people have experienced all that Paul suffered, and fewer still have been given the responsibility he had. Yet, as we will see, even the more ordinary suffering that we go through—suffering that may *not* be as a direct result of our faith—is part of the trials and tribulations of this age, and it will bear positive fruit *if it is approached in faith*.

In [Colossians 1:24](#), Paul makes a remarkable statement: "I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church." Notice the same verse in *The Amplified Bible*:

[Even] now I rejoice in the midst of my sufferings on your behalf. And in my own person I am making up whatever is still lacking and remains to be completed of Christ's afflictions, for the sake of His body, which is the church.

Paul claims that he is in the process of completing or filling up what remained in order for his afflictions to get to the level of Jesus Christ's afflictions. What does he mean? The Greek word translated as "afflictions" is never used in reference to [the crucifixion](#). Instead, it refers to the pressure, the troubles, and the distress that Christ suffered during His life. The apostle is saying that all the afflictions that Jesus suffered are at one level, and all of his own afflictions are at a lower one, but by laboring on behalf of the Gentiles in Colossae, Paul was filling up the difference between them.

This expresses Paul's greatest desire to be just like Christ, which included having the same experiences that His Savior did. Paul was suffering in the cause of the church, just as Christ did. Paul was enduring the rejection, the contempt, and the abuse, similar to what Christ did. Paul was not suggesting that he would ever *complete* all that was lacking, only that as he was suffering, he could compare it with what Christ suffered and say, "I'm not there yet, but I'm getting closer." Paul yearned so greatly to be made just like Christ in all respects that he was rejoicing at the opportunity to experience

more of what Christ endured, as well as to labor on behalf of the Body of believers just as Christ did.

This attitude of Paul's is also evident in [Philippians 3:8-11](#):

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 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; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the [resurrection from the dead](#).

Paul's main thought is that he suffered the loss of all things in order to gain Christ, to know Him, to know the power of His resurrection, and to know the fellowship of His sufferings.

The word translated "fellowship" here is the same one that is translated as "communion" in reference to the [Passover](#) bread and wine (see [I Corinthians 10:16](#)). Out of this comes a principle regarding suffering: It brings us into fellowship with others who have suffered or who are suffering in a similar way. To put it differently, we do not really know someone until we have suffered alongside him. If we suffer with someone, it is a form of fellowship, and a powerful bond develops from it.

Therefore, if we are suffering, even if it is not directly because of our beliefs, it gives us an opportunity to fellowship with Christ. He experienced life as a human being just like us, and we would be hard pressed to find a circumstance that He cannot relate to. However, it is even more important for us to relate *our* sufferings to what *He* suffered—rather than the reverse, to keep the focus on His experience more than our own—because it is in that comparison that we begin to get a clearer picture of our Savior.

Paul says that he suffered the loss of all things to know the fellowship of Christ's sufferings. This recalls Paul's desire to be as closely conformed to Him as possible. Because a common experience helps us to get to know

someone, Paul wholeheartedly believed that it was worth having similar afflictions as Jesus throughout the course of his Christian life of service, because it meant that he would know Christ that much more.

Next time, we will consider the faithful response to suffering.

- David C. Grabbe

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## **From the Archives: Featured Sermon**

### **[Facing Times of Stress: Grieved by Various Trials](#)**

by Martin G. Collins

As Christians, we can be conditioned to rejoice in trials, paradoxically having joy in the midst of grief and heaviness. Trials come in great variety, from persecution to alienation to martyrdom. We must understand why these trials happen to us. If we have a "why," we can put up with any "how," enabling us to inwardly rejoice in the ultimate outcome, realizing that we are in a special relationship with God. Faith from God will be required to endure and profit from trials, bringing about character and genuineness of faith, as well as patience and trust in Almighty God. We are not permanently under trial, but are tried for a finite time only for our purification, ultimate good, and perfection.

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## **From the Archives: Featured Article**

### **[The Torment of the Godly \(Part One\)](#)**

by Charles Whitaker

God's prophets have a difficult job. They see the world around them through God's eyes, and they are tormented by the rising tide of sin and the coming destruction it will bring. Charles Whitaker focuses on a few of Ezekiel's visions to reveal what is really happening behind the scenes and how God's people should respond to it.

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