

Suffering Toward Sanctification

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ABSTRACT
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The writer of Hebrews speaks Jesus being ‘made perfect’ through suffering (5:8). Since suffering was the means by which the sinless Christ became mature, it is evident that his followers will experience, and even require, suffering in the process of their sanctification. This thesis argues that suffering as a follower of Christ is a vital aspect of the process of sanctification, as evidenced by scripture’s own explanation of the Christian’s suffering in relation to that of Christ’s own suffering. Specifically, scripture uses three metaphors to describe how God uses suffering in making us holy: the father disciplining his children, the metalworker refining his silver and gold, and the gardener pruning his vine. Each of these metaphors describes a negative process that brings a positive result. This thesis examines and compares these three metaphors and what they indicate about the role of suffering in the sanctification of the believer.

Following the introduction, this thesis addresses the meaning of suffering and through a brief overview from the biblical record and the early church fathers. The role of suffering in the life of Jesus is examined with a focus on two especially relevant passages: Hebrews 2:10 and 5:7-8. The value of suffering for Christ has immense implications for its value in the lives of his followers. One of those followers, the Apostle Paul, gives us a detailed account of his sufferings, and chapter four briefly considers how suffering affected Paul.

Chapter five addresses the role of suffering in the lives of Christ's followers with a view toward the sanctifying affects of trials and tribulations. The three biblical metaphors are reviewed in chapter six with the goal of discovering how they support the claim that suffering is vital to sanctification. The overall value of suffering for the Christian is the topic of chapter seven, with the resulting concluding chapter supporting the thesis statement.

To Leigh

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CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

On September 14, 1901, President William McKinley died, eight days after he had been shot by an assassin. The nation mourned the death of its twenty-fifth president, a leader known for his sincere Christian faith. In October of that same year, *The Biblical World*, published by the University of Chicago, ran an editorial entitled “Character and Service Through Suffering.” In that editorial McKinley was hailed as a Christian hero, having died “to the cause of order, right, and truth; he will receive a martyr’s honor.”¹ The editorial continued, “Both his character and his service were perfected in those seven days of anguish. May his vicarious sufferings have that purifying and uplifting influence upon our nation which martyrdom in God’s providence has never failed to bring, so that good government and the Christian brotherhood of men shall through President McKinley have received a mighty impulse toward complete realization.”²

Significant to the viewpoint of the editorial in *The Biblical World* is the argument that suffering was more than God’s punishment for sin or the inescapable consequences of life in a fallen world. The editorial made the case that the only way the Christian can “attain the ideal of character, and render to his fellow-men the ideal of service” is “in the

¹ “Character Through Service and Suffering,” *The Biblical World* 18 (1901): 248.

² Ibid.

midst of and through sufferings.”³ In suffering, Christians follow the way of their Master, drinking the cup that he had to drink, and in so doing are furthered along in the pursuit of their sanctification. And not only this, the editorial also made the claim that true Christian suffering was both vicarious and substitutionary in nature. “The disciples of Christ today suffer, as the first disciples suffered, from the animalism, inertia, selfishness, self-sufficiency, and pride of the mass of men - suffer at the hands of, but also for the salvation of, these men, to bring them to the recognition and attainment of the highest individual and social good.”⁴

Eighty-one years after McKinley’s death, Rabbi Harold Kushner published the book “Why Bad Things Happen to Good People” and in it contended, among other points, that suffering’s purpose was not all that easy to discern. While admitting that some suffering can have beneficial, even “atoning” effects, he stated “I have seen some people made noble and sensitive through suffering, but I have seen many more people grow cynical and bitter.”⁵ Kushner comments to capture the general consensus of his day regarding suffering from a religious point of view.

Suffering is one of the most disturbing and profound of human experiences. Stan van Hooft puts it this way: “The very word suffering has a resonance that relates to our sense of life’s meaning and the threat of suffering poses to our hopes of happiness.”⁶ Similarly, Langdon Gilkey writes, “For clearly suffering, along with its elder sibling

³ Ibid., 246-247.

⁴ Ibid., 247.

⁵ Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), 26.

⁶ Stan van Hooft, “The Meanings of Suffering,” *The Hastings Center Report* 28, no. 5 (1998): 14.

‘evil,’ enter this stage (of human existence) as aliens, as anomalies, as interlopers and ‘spoilers,’ as in fact enemies to what is – either to what is ‘already there’ or to what ‘essential is’.”⁷

Suffering can come in many forms and affect humans in many ways, and suffering is essentially a spiritual phenomenon since it often strikes at the heart of our faith. Perhaps the central question regarding suffering is whether it is a good thing or a bad thing in life. Van Hooft points out that, “If suffering were seen as a positive event or force in our lives, we would be better able to endure it.”⁸ Suffering is seen as negative when it hinders the fulfillment of the biological aims of the body or involves pain or other frustrations of our desires and needs, and when it frustrates our practical projects and pursuit of everyday goals. But suffering can be viewed as positive when it brings about a desired effect that has value greater than the suffering through which the effect is realized.

That suffering is a part of the human experience is agreed upon by just about everyone, no matter which religious or secular worldview they hold. The question of “why?” is perhaps the most often asked question in regard to suffering. Two of the oldest Christian answers are that suffering is part of God’s judgment on man’s sin and that God allows, even sends, suffering in order that Christians may grow spiritually. Other answers to the “why” question include that suffering is a result of living in the fallen physical world, is a result of man’s freedom or independence, or simply is part of the inscrutable purpose of God.⁹

⁷ Langdon Gilkey, “The Christian Understanding of Suffering,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 5 (1985): 54.

⁸ Van Hooft, 14.

⁹ Randy Becton, *Does Care When We Suffer* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 43-51.

There are other questions about suffering besides the question of “why?” C.S. Lewis commented that the real problem is not why some humble, pious, believing people suffer, but why some do not.¹⁰ Langdon Gilkey identifies four questions that suffering evokes: The question of the source or cause of suffering; the question of the anatomy of suffering; the question of how suffering is overcome, conquered or redeemed; and the question of the role or purpose of suffering.¹¹ Because suffering is part of the shared human experience, every culture needs to appropriate, in some meaningful fashion, the universal truth of human suffering. Nathan Kollar suggests four common answers to our questions about suffering. Suffering is either (1) absurd, (2) inescapable, (3) unreal, or (4) part of some overall plan.¹² Kenneth Doka and John Morgan point out that for the one who suffers, the more immediate problem of suffering is this: How shall I live through it? How shall I play the role? How do I do this?¹³ For this thesis the main question asked is “What is the value of suffering, and particularly the role of suffering in the growth and development of Christ likeness?” For the Christian, suffering constitutes one of the greatest challenges to the life of faith, and has been such in every generation. John Stott writes of suffering, “Its distribution and degree appear to be entirely random and therefore unfair. Sensitive spirits asks if it can possibly be reconciled with God’s justice and love.”¹⁴ Christians have always traced evil and suffering

¹⁰ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 93.

¹¹ Gilkey, 50-51.

¹² Kenneth Doka and John D. Morgan, *Death and Spirituality: Death, Value and Meaning* (Amityville, NY: Baywood Publishing, 1993), 151-153.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁴ John R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1966), 311.

to mankind's fall described in the third chapter of Genesis. In fact, suffering helps to prove the fall, and throughout history Christians so knew and experienced the pervasive, universal, and conquering reality of suffering that they found perfectly credible the biblical explanation for it.¹⁵

Any truthful account of the Christian life must include suffering as an integral part of that life. It was Christ himself who gave his followers a model for how to expect and experience suffering. The second member of the Trinity, described in Isaiah "the Suffering Servant," lived for a time on earth and suffered as a human. Consider Peter's progression in describing Christ's suffering and our suffering in 1 Peter: "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps."¹⁶ "Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm ourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin."¹⁷ "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed."¹⁸ "And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast."¹⁹ The Oxford English Dictionary defines suffering as

¹⁵ Gilkey, 56.

¹⁶ 1 Pet. 2:21 (NIV).

¹⁷ 1 Pet. 4:1 (NIV).

¹⁸ 1 Pet. 4:12-13 (NIV).

¹⁹ 1 Pet. 5:10 (NIV).

“the bearing or undergoing of pain, distress, or tribulation.”²⁰ Dennis Klass asserts that suffering is “physical as we experience our body’s pain or incapacity...social as we experience the loneliness of being isolated from family and community...psychological as we feel the accusations of shortcomings from our conscience and memory.”²¹ Fernando Gonzalbo identifies suffering as “pain, sickness, separation, abandonment, death...”²²

Suffering is closely related to pain. Pain occurs in relation to a variety of experiences and can convey a variety of messages. There is pain in childbirth, a time of otherwise great joy. Some pain is a natural result of growth and maturation, as what is sometimes referred to as “growth pains” in children. Not all pain, however, is simply the unfortunate but necessary by-product of growth. Some pain is the result of injury. Other pain is associated with experiences of rejection or alienation. Pain can be viewed in a positive light some of the time and interpreted more negatively most of the time. Some pain is willingly embraced while other pain is actively resisted. Spiritual pain has been defined as the agony of unmet need.²³

Gonzalbo identified two basic ways of interpreting human suffering and pain: a tragic way and a messianic way. The tragic way consists of assuming that suffering is a result of

²⁰ *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol. II (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 3141.

²¹ Dennis Klass, “Spirituality, Protestantism, and Death,” in Kenneth Doka and John D. Morgan, *Death and Spirituality: Death, Value and Meaning* (Amityville, NY: Baywood Publishing, 1993), 68.

²² Fernando Escalante Gonzalbo, *In the Eyes of God: A Study on the Culture of Suffering*, trans. Jessica C. Locke (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 2.

²³ Patrice O’Connor, “A Clinical Paradigm for Exploring Spiritual Concerns,” in Doka and Morgan, 137.

“the capricious will of the gods or of fate.” The messianic way sees merit in suffering as it is inseparable from justice, at least as justice is perceived of by human intelligence.²⁴ It is the ambiguity of the meaning of suffering, whether conceived of as punishment or purification, worldly sentence or merit for the afterlife that is a part of what Gonzalbo calls “the intimate framework of Christianity.”²⁵

Christian ethicist and theologian Stanley Hauerwas affirms that suffering is part and parcel of the Christian’s experience, but he warns against making suffering an end in itself, or acquiescing to kinds of suffering that can and should be alleviated. “It is important that we be able to distinguish those forms of suffering that derive directly from the way of life occasioned by our faithfulness to the cross from those forms of suffering that do not.”²⁶

There is no guarantee that suffering will have any desired effect, much less the effect of advancing the sufferer’s closeness to God, or in the particular case of Christianity, likeness to Christ. But it can be argued that suffering as a follower of Christ is a vital aspect of the process of sanctification, as evidenced by Scripture’s own explanation of the Christian’s suffering in relation to that of Christ’s own suffering, and the role of the Holy Spirit in the Christian’s sanctification.

Scripture describes the Holy Spirit as continually at work in the believer’s life, conforming us more and more to the image of Christ. This process of spiritual and moral renewal and transformation is commonly referred to as sanctification, and has at its root the

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 67.

²⁶ Stanley Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences: God, Medicine, and the Problem of Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 85.

idea of being set apart or consecrated. Another related meaning of sanctification in theological usage is the attainment of intrinsic holiness of character.²⁷

Sanctification, then, is the process by which God changes the Christian into a man or woman whose character and actions more resemble the Lord Jesus Christ. Berkhof defines sanctification as “the gracious and continuous operation of the Holy Spirit, by which He delivers the justified sinner from the pollution of sin, renews his whole nature in the image of God, and enables him to perform good works.”²⁸ Sanctification is a supernatural work of God, and it is also a collaborative effort between God and the individual, with each party having tasks to do. Paul describes it this way in his letter to the Philippians “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.”²⁹ God prepares our hearts, sets up the circumstances of our lives, and brings forth the results from the work he is doing in us. We participate in much the same way that a patient might participate in his own brain surgery – working with the surgeon, reporting to him what is being experienced and felt as the surgeon probes and cuts one way, then another. We are thus partners in our spiritual surgery.³⁰

Peter claimed that the qualities of Christian character are built over time in increasing measure (2 Peter 1:18). Paul identified as spiritual fruit those life qualities that result from

²⁷ Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth: A Handbook of Christian Belief* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1998), 241.

²⁸ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 532.

²⁹ Phil. 2:12-13 (NIV).

³⁰ Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *How People Grow: What the Bible Reveals About Personal Growth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 335-336.

walking in the Spirit (Galatians 6:8-9). F.F. Bruce commented that the holiness that is the goal of sanctification “is not attained ‘sudden,’ in a minute.”³¹ And Paul and Barnabas reminded the young churches of Galatia of this truth: “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.”³²

It is clear, therefore, that God uses the trials, afflictions and sufferings of life to shape his people into greater Christ-likeness. Suffering has meaning for the Christ-follower, and it is often a means of life changing transformation. Historically, suffering has been interpreted from differing viewpoints in the church. Christ’s own sufferings provide a model of how God uses suffering for his redemptive purposes. Scripture gives us three particularly helpful metaphors of how God uses suffering in the lives of believers. It is to these issues that we now turn.

³¹ F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 359.

³² Acts 14:22 (NIV).

CHAPTER TWO

THE MEANING OF SUFFERING

The character Ivan in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* tells the story of a child who accidentally hits a dog while throwing a stone. The dog's owner responds the next day by having the child torn to pieces before his mother's eyes. Ivan remarks, "It's not that I don't accept God, you must understand, it's the world created by Him I don't and cannot accept."¹ Ivan does not doubt the existence of God, but he rejects the idea that God can be good. Since the world mirrors the One who made it, and the world is filled with such evil, then God must also be evil. Ivan acknowledges the challenge of finding meaning in suffering and relating that meaning to the nature of God's actions and purposes.

Suffering gives rise to a variety of responses from different religious or secular perspectives. For instance, the Jewish view of suffering can be understood as part and parcel of their becoming God's chosen people. The Exodus story became for the Jewish people a defining narrative in their self understanding, and this story is filled with suffering. The suffering that was part of the leaving Egypt is retold at each family Passover Seder, connecting each generation with the shared history of the Jews.²

¹ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (New York: Dell, 1956), 173.

² Sylvia Walsh, *Living Christianly: Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Christian Existence* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania University Press, 2005), 37.

Individuals in the Old Testament experienced the impact of that unique love of God which the nation came to realize. David, Manasseh, and Job were all taught harsh lessons of divine discipline to bring them closer to God. In the case of Manasseh, as was the case with the whole nation in the prophetic books, there had to be a complete about-face to return to God. God would often reprove David as he would a son, whereas Job went through extreme suffering as a righteous, God-fearing man but gained a whole new perspective on his understanding of God.³ Job serves as a model of someone who suffers without loss of faith, having suffered not because of his own sin but, in a real sense, as a result of a conversation between Satan and God. Job learns faithfulness in his suffering.

Of all the Old Testament books it is the Book of Psalms that accepts the reality of anguish and suffering, wickedness and violence, in oneself and in humanity, while maintaining a confidence that God is merciful and can transform suffering. Suffering is not ignored as a reality even in the life of a man like David, who is described with affectionate terms by the God who uses suffering as discipline in his life.

Since New Testament times there have historically been two different theological approaches to the problem of Christian suffering. John Hick summarizes these as the Augustinian view and Irenaean view. The “Augustinian view” sees life’s sufferings primarily as God’s punishment for Adam’s sin. To Augustine, suffering as punishment is a result of the broken relationship between God and man. But this view of suffering did not

³ Jim Alvin Sanders, “Suffering as Divine Discipline in the Old Testament and Post-Biblical Judaism,” *Colgate Rochester Divinity School Bulletin* 28 (Nov. 1955): 94.

maintain its primary focus in the church for long, since it was seen as a primeval and naïve reaction to the problem of suffering.⁴

Predating the Augustinian view was that described by Hick as the Irenaean view, which sees life's trials as aiding man's moral development.⁵ Irenaeus, an early church father, believed that God wants Christians to accept the events of their lives, including suffering, with a "teachable spirit, as means whereby His creative purpose for us is fulfilled."⁶ Irenaeus believed that these sufferings were allowed to prevent an everlasting continuation of sin, and saw suffering as a means of grace.⁷

Gilkey argues that, for generations, from Irenaeus to Schleiermacher, the generally accepted explanation of suffering included the following components: (1) neither evil nor suffering were necessary aspects of life created by God, (2) because of the temptations of freedom and the lure of Satan, the first and representative man and woman misused this freedom and disobeyed God's command, and (3) sufferings of all types (physical, psychological, mental, natural, scarcity, disease, conflict, injustice, death) resulted from this disobedience.

Macarius of Egypt wrote in the fourth century of biblical characters like Joseph, David, Moses, Abraham, and Noah, interpreting their examples of suffering as evidence of the power of God's grace given to the faithful with much contention as well as

⁴ Stan van Hooft, "The Meanings of Suffering," *The Hastings Center Report* 28, no. 5 (1998): 14.

⁵ John Bowker, *Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 85.

⁶ Randy Bechton, *Does God Care When We Suffer?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 47.

⁷ Langdon Gilkey, "The Christian Understanding of Suffering," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 5 (1985): 56-57.

endurance, patience, trials, and testings.⁸ In the fifth century, John Chrysostom viewed suffering as perfecting us and a vital aspect of our salvation, and related the Christian's suffering to Christ. "Do you see that to suffer affliction is not the fate of those who are utterly forsaken, if indeed it was by the leading him through suffering that God first honored his Son?"⁹ He gave significant value to suffering since Christ also suffered: "If he, though the Son, gains obedience from his sufferings, how much more shall we?"¹⁰

Some of the men and women the church recognizes as spiritual masters, individuals like St. John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, and Ignatius of Loyola, wrote of a kind of spiritual pain that they recognized as an essential dimension of life and growth leading to greater maturity in Christ. They asserted that even though experiences of suffering may be unwelcome, they could be embraced with a sense of grace and, perhaps, even gratitude.¹¹

A number of Christians since the early church saw suffering as it related to asceticism to be something sought for themselves. Ignatius was eager to be torn to pieces by wild animals in order to be perfected as a disciple. Origin of Alexandria emasculated himself as a youth in literal compliance with Jesus' statement, "For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the

⁸ Frances M. Young, *Brokenness and Blessing: Toward a Biblical Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 58.

⁹ Erik M. Heen and Philip D.W. Krey, eds., *Hebrews*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2005), 43.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹¹ Rod Burton, "Spiritual Pain: A Brief Overview and an Initial Response Within the Christian Tradition," *The Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling* 57, no. 4 (2003): 440-441.

kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it."¹² Later, monks and spiritual ascetics would wear hair shirts, deprive themselves of nourishment and sleep, or, when eating, sprinkle their food with wormwood and ashes, being convinced that plain food was too tasty for their souls.¹³

By the time of the church in the Middle Ages, suffering was not only expected, it was often welcomed in the life of the Christian. Trials and temptations were not feared so much as a quick death was dreaded. Suffering provided opportunity for preparation, repentance, and cleansing, allowing for atonement or payment for sins.¹⁴ Anselm saw suffering as representing an essential, even necessary, condition for redemption. He believed that because of the separation and guilt that results from sin, both repentant sinners and the holy God must suffer if a reunion of humans and deity is to take place.¹⁵

The accounts of superhuman endurance in the face of agonizing suffering that are found in Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* emphasize the separation of the vulnerable body from the inviolable spirit and the liberation of the spirit through suffering. According to Knott, Foxe showed no interest in the connection between suffering and religious ecstasy that is found in medieval asceticism.¹⁶ Foxe's martyrs are looking forward to joining a perfected community

¹² Matt. 19:12 (ESV).

¹³ Merrill Proudfoot, *Suffering: A Christian Understanding* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 137.

¹⁴ Kenneth Doka and John D. Morgan, *Death and Spirituality: Death, Value and Meaning* (Amityville, NY: Baywood Publishing, 1993), 132.

¹⁵ Gilkey, 61.

¹⁶ John R. Knott, "John Foxe and the Joy of Suffering," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 27, no. 3 (1996): 724.

of the faithful in heaven rather than in achieving some type of ecstatic vision of God on earth.

“They do not embrace pain as a means of joining themselves with the body of the suffering Christ. Rather, they see suffering and pain as a trial of faith.”¹⁷

A change in the Christian approach took place with the Enlightenment. With the diminished view of the authority of the Bible in theological discourse, the doctrine of the fall seemed far off in a land of make believe named Eden, and new ways of understanding human evil and suffering were deemed necessary. Hegel and Schliermacher provided these new models of understanding suffering. Schliermacher in particular distinguished natural from moral evil, explaining the first under the discussion of creation and the second under that of the Fall. He viewed sufferings that arise from human finitude as aspects of man’s created goodness, not as a result of the consequence of sin. These sufferings, taking place in a world that by nature was good, provided the necessary conditions for man’s moral development, and Schliermacher claimed that without them personality, decision, and virtue would be meaningless.¹⁸

Following the Great Awakening of the Eighteenth Century John Wesley encouraged his faithful followers to strive “that the inward self may be partakers of that glory in this present life” and so “become the pure habitation of the Holy Spirit...attaining heights which the soul does not reach all at once, but through many labors and conflicts, with variety of

¹⁷ Ibid., 725-726.

¹⁸ Gilkey, 58.

trials and temptations, it receives spiritual growth and improvement, till at last it comes to an entire exemption from its afflictions.”¹⁹

The Post-Enlightenment tendency was to view suffering as grounds for atheism. The current assumptions of western culture include the notion that most all ills can (or one day will be) be removed, death postponed, and risk eliminated, once we find the right formula. The presupposition of this mindset is that bad things should not happen, or certainly should not happen to good people, and since they do happen, even to good people, the world is imperfect, and there cannot be a God.²⁰

Suffering has also been viewed through the lens of eschatology. Edward Schillebeeckx, for example, viewed suffering as “a critical epistemological force which leads to new action, which anticipates a better future and seeks to put it into practice.”²¹ Similarly, African-Americans developed a view of suffering related to the institution of slavery that differed significantly in the way pain and suffering are perceived when compared to the white majority. The spirituals and sermons that came out of the experience of slavery reflected a consistent belief that the better life, which had yet to come, was what gave one the ability to endure suffering, and in doing so, made the unendurable bearable. The promised reward of a life of joy and happiness after death was earned in part through the slave’s suffering in life, and this served as a major source of life-sustenance.²²

¹⁹ Young, 59.

²⁰ Young, 30.

²¹ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 818.

²² David K. Meagher and Craig P. Bell, “*Perspectives on Death in the African-American Community*,” in Doka and Morgan, 128.

The postmodern mindset views weakness, suffering and death as accepted parts of life with which man must simply come to terms. Following two world wars in the twentieth century, the secular and scientific mindset found no real point in suffering. Pope John Paul II was probably correct to say that modern man lacks the theological or philosophical framework to interpret suffering.²³ Yet secularists have the same need as religious people when they suffer the pain of loss and separation. Paul Irion reminds us that they still look to find some meaning in their suffering, “they search for answers to the questions that death has always raised for human rationality.”²⁴

In the West, the primary way of giving suffering meaning in the religious context is still derived from Christianity. Christ’s suffering on the cross is a paradigm of positive suffering, and every Christian is called to participate in this suffering by dedicating his or her own suffering to this salvific task or by declaring his or her faith in its achievement.²⁵ The Roman Catholic view of the nature of suffering was summarized in Pope John Paul II’s letter on “The Christian Meaning of Human Suffering,” issued in February of 1989. Writing about the sufferings of Christ, the pope affirmed that “It seems to be part of the very essence of Christ’s redemptive suffering that this suffering requires to be unceasingly completed.” The pope continued, “Suffering is something good before which the church bows down in reverence with all the depth of her faith in the redemption.”²⁶

²³ Doka and Morgan, 132.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

²⁵ Van Hooft, 15.

²⁶ Salvifici Doloris, “The Christian Meaning of Suffering,” *Origins* 13, no. 37 (1989): 618.

Explaining the origination of suffering and trials does not dissolve their reality or necessarily define their meaning. Yet, for the Christian, suffering can have value in the way it is used by God. An intriguing viewpoint on this idea is found in the French mystic Simone Weil, who went beyond the philosophical explanation of suffering to an existential understanding. She wrote, “The extreme greatness of Christianity lies in the fact that it does not seek a supernatural remedy for suffering but a supernatural use for it.”²⁷ Weil distinguished between everyday pain and suffering as troubles we can cope with, and affliction, which she saw as a form of suffering that damages the self, crushes the spirit and leads often to despair. She saw the latter type of suffering as participating in the suffering of Christ.²⁸ Weil was no stranger to suffering in her own life. She rejected the theological idea of God’s providence, believing instead in what she called “divine necessity,” a syncretistic understanding of God giving freedom to creation by abandoning it to its own existence. This allowed Weil to develop a theology of suffering which combined suffering with the ideals of joy and beauty. In her thinking, both suffering and joy stir up a longing in man for something unattainable on earth. She saw affliction and beauty as the only two experiences which were able to penetrate the soul of man.²⁹

Weil discerned five uses for suffering in man’s life: (1) suffering helped individuals to grasp the true nature of necessity in the world, (2) allows them to share compassion in the

²⁷ Stephen Plant, “Simone Weil and the Supernatural Use of Suffering,” *Epworth Review* 26, no. 4 (October 1999): 23.

²⁸ Van Hooft, 16.

²⁹ Heather Webb, “Sufferings Sacred Cost: The Life of Simone Weil,” *Mars Hill Review* 3 (1995): 115.

suffering of others, (3) enables sufferers to experience the affliction of God in Christ, (4) provides a point of contact with true religion wherever it is to be found, and (5) reminds man of the necessity for God to suffer so that God would not be less than man.³⁰

The Apostle Paul wrote often about the experience of suffering, both his own as well as that of the believers and churches with which he corresponded. This suffering came from different sources. Some was due to opposition and oppression that their allegiance to Christ aroused in the world (2 Cor. 12:7). Some was directly a result of the opposition of Satan (2 Cor. 12:7). Suffering resulted from living life in a mortal body within a perishing order. Certainly suffering arose from the crucifixion of the old self, and recurrent failures and agonizingly slow progress on the path of spiritual maturity. The chastening judgment of God in response to his people's sins was restorative but nevertheless painful.³¹

Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica about the meaning of the suffering they were experiencing. "For you, brothers, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews, who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out."³² He added about their trials, "You know quite well that you were destined for them. In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it

³⁰ Plant, 29.

³¹ J. Knox Chamblin, *Paul and the Self: Apostolic Teaching for Personal Wholeness* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 169.

³² 1 Thess. 2:14-15 (NIV).

turned out that way, as you well know.”³³

Two contemporary Christian psychologists have written about the meaning of suffering in the life of the believer. Henry Cloud and Stuart Townsend are psychologists with years of experience in counseling Christians who have experienced all types of suffering. For them, not all suffering is alike. They identify two distinct types of suffering: that which is therapeutic and that which is destructive. The key is to be able to tell the difference between the two and apply the right kind of interpretation to each one.

Cloud and Townsend illustrate these two types of suffering with a story of a mugging and a surgery. If someone wearing a mask were to walk up to you in the dark, stab you in the stomach with a knife, take all your money, and leave you unconscious in the street, you would identify him as a mugger. Someone should call the police and try to catch the perpetrator. But if you drove yourself to a local hospital, and a man wearing a mask came to you in a brightly lit room, took out a knife and cut open your stomach, took all your money, and left you in an unconscious state, you would call that person a doctor and thank him for helping you. Mugging and surgery might look similar but in reality are quite different. Suffering can be like that.³⁴

Cloud and Townsend see God at work in the experience of Christian suffering. “God stretches our souls to grow them into something stronger and better.”³⁵ Certain suffering tears down parts of our character that need to be torn down while building up new aspects that we

³³ 1 Thess. 3:3-4 (NIV).

³⁴ Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *How People Grow: What the Bible Reveals About Personal Growth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 207.

³⁵ Ibid.

need in order live more faithful, God-oriented lives. Thus suffering can be good and grow Christians deeper than the normal life of comfort can do. But they also assert that some suffering can also be terrible, not useful for God's healing and building up but in actuality inflicting evil on the Christian's heart and soul and occurring outside of God's desire.

“Although God can bring good out of the experience, the experience itself is no good at all.”³⁶

Suffering promotes Christian growth in part because it cuts through the coping mechanisms we use to deal with life's pains and disappointments. Trials and sufferings can push these mechanisms past the breaking point and identify areas where we need to grow. This allows for spiritual growth at deeper levels and provides the soil for righteousness and character to take root in place of coping.³⁷

Jesus suffered while he was on earth, and according to scripture his sufferings had a purpose. Most obvious would be that his sufferings, especially on the cross, were central to God's redemptive plan for the world. But scripture also indicates that suffering played another role in the life of Christ. It is to that issue that we now turn.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 213.

CHAPTER THREE

THE ROLE OF SUFFERING IN THE LIFE OF CHRIST

Makoto Fujimura is a Japanese-American artist whose work is created by the crushing and destruction of mineral pigments. James Romaine, instructor of art at the New York Center for Art and Media Studies, describes the effects of this technique: “The very destruction allows light to pass through them and create a light that seems to come from within the painting, a unifying light that brings the viewer into what you might call ‘an arena of grace.’ But that ‘arena of grace’ is only created by the suffering, the crushing, and the destruction of those mineral pigments. And so the theme of his work is grace through suffering.”¹

An artist like Makoto Fujimura captures in his art something of the nature of God’s redemptive workings. God came to earth in the incarnate Son Jesus who was recognized as being “full of grace and truth.”² As a man, Jesus identified with men by living life side by side with humanity. The writer of Hebrews describes it like this: “...he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”³

¹ Collin Hansen, *Intersect Culture: Taking Your Group to a Place where Faith and Culture Meet*, DVD (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today International, 2006).

² John 1:14 (NIV).

³ Heb. 2:17-18 (NIV).

The writer of Hebrews speaks of Jesus being ‘made perfect’ through suffering: “In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering.”⁴ Jesus’ suffering was essential, in some way, for the divine plan of salvation. In fact, Hebrews speaks of Jesus, even though he was God, as having a type of learning experience in his suffering. “During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek”⁵

Suffering played a vital role in the life and ministry of our Savior. Scripture makes it clear that Jesus suffered, and not just during His Passion. He suffered the loss of his eternal standing in heaven when he came to live on the earth (Phil. 2:5-11). On many occasions during his earthly ministry he faced scorn, ridicule, doubt, and outright opposition from those who either did not understand him or who understood him all too well. He suffered every temptation and all the wiles of the devil and his minions. Jesus suffered the pain of each suffering person he healed. He suffered the lack of basic comforts and conveniences - nowhere to lay his head. He suffered the harassment of people who insisted he minister on their schedule rather than his own. He suffered disciples, slow to understand, who never quite got it, but, he knew, one day would. In the midst of all his suffering Jesus never once appealed to the world for relief. He did not complain about his suffering.

⁴ Heb. 2:10 (NIV).

⁵ Heb. 5:7-8 (NIV).

Related to Christ's suffering is the concept of his humiliation. Reformed theology typically distinguishes two different elements in the humiliation of Christ. One is the *kenosis*, or emptying, consisting of the fact that Jesus laid aside his divine majesty as the ruler of the universe and assumed human nature in the form of a servant. The other is the *tapeinosis*, or humiliation, reminding us that Jesus became subject to the demands of the curse of the law, and in his entire life became obedient in action and suffering to the very limit of a shameful death. Along with this, Reformed theology generally names five stages of Christ's humiliation, which are (1) incarnation, (2) suffering, (3) death, (4) burial, and (5) descent into Hades.⁶

Berkhof relates several helpful points regarding Christ's sufferings. One is that Christ suffered during his entire life, since his sufferings on earth were not confined to the final agonies leading to and including the cross. In his daily life Christ suffered as the Holy One in a sin-cursed world. He also suffered repeated assaults from Satan and from the hatred and unbelief of his own people, even his own family. He was often walking this life alone, carrying the overwhelming weight of responsibility for his role in the Father's redemptive plan. Christ suffered physically, but Berkhof suggests it was the pain that accompanied the anguish of his soul that was his greater burden. Both body and soul were affected when Christ bore the punishment for sin.⁷

In the last analysis, Christ's sufferings were unique and greater than those of any moral man. He suffered from the ordinary causes of misery in the world, but more so than

⁶ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 332.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 336-337.

the rest of humanity. His capacity for suffering was commensurate with the ideal nature of his character so that he felt the pain and grief of moral evil to a greater extent. He suffered temptations as in integral part of his experience, and his public ministry commenced with an extended time of temptation. Hebrews 5:7-9 reminds us that it was important that Jesus suffer these temptations so that he could become a truly sympathetic High Priest. All the sufferings of our Savior culminated in his death on the cross. For he bore in his body the wrath of God against the sin of the entire human race. The man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, reached the apex of his suffering when he cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"⁸ He suffered not only the physical death of a hanging on a cross, but the full effects of bearing God's infinite wrath against sin.⁹

Hebrews 2:10 says that it was appropriate that God should make Jesus perfect through this suffering. Hebrews 5:8 speaks of Jesus learning obedience through his suffering. But this raises the question of whether or not this means that in some way Jesus' sonship was not perfect? Guthrie contends that here we are faced with the mystery of the nature of Jesus. Following a line of thought he finds in Philo, Guthrie asserts that when we consider Jesus as God's Son it may be impossible to attach any real meaning to the idea of learned obedience. But when we think of Jesus as the perfect man it becomes an intelligible concept, for by a progressive process Jesus showed obedience to the Father's will in making the Father's will his own, reaching its climax in his approach to death at the cross.¹⁰

⁸ Mk. 15:34 (NIV).

⁹ Berkhof, 339.

¹⁰ Donald Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 131.

Christ is clearly presented in the scripture as sinless. In Hebrews 7:26 Jesus is called “holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners...” Paul writes of Christ that “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us...”¹¹ John writes, “...and in him is no sin.”¹² Peter quotes from Isaiah 53:9 and applies it to Jesus when he writes, “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.”¹³ The New Testament writers agree regarding Christ that he was perfect in a moral sense. The word translated as *perfect* appears frequently in the Book of Hebrews. It normally signifies the completion of a process.¹⁴ In reference to Jesus being made perfect, it indicates that he was fully qualified to be the savior of mankind by undergoing the experience of human suffering, since suffering is the way to salvation. According to Brown, it was through suffering that Jesus (1) became perfect in his vocation, (2) became perfect in obedience, (3) became perfect in his identification, and (4) became perfect in his conquest.¹⁵ In all these ways Jesus, through his suffering, became fully qualified to be known eternally as the savior of the world.

Lane also comments on the idea of the appropriateness of Jesus, the Son of God, suffering as a man. He writes, “What has taken place in the experience of Jesus was consistent with God’s known character and purpose.”¹⁶ God’s intention was to lead mankind toward the goal for which they had been created. Mankind’s sin mocked this divine

¹¹ 2 Cor. 5:21 (NIV).

¹² 1 Jn. 3:5 (NIV).

¹³ 1 Pet. 2:22 (NIV).

¹⁴ Raymond Brown, *Christ Above All: The Message of Hebrews* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1982): 61.

¹⁵ Brown, 62.

¹⁶ William Lane, *Hebrews 1-8* (Dallas: Word, 1991), 55.

intention. Lane argues that the sufferings of Jesus were appropriate to the goal to be attained and were experienced in accordance with God's fixed purpose. In reference to Jesus being made perfect through sufferings, Lane points out that the verb has a special nuance that directs the interpretation of the concept. The verb is used in ceremonial texts of the Pentateuch to signify the act of consecrating a priest to his office (Ex. 29:9, 29, 33, 35; Lev. 4:5; 8:33; 16:32; 21:10; Num. 3:3). Lane sees a close connection between perfection and consecration and finds the emphasis being on the fact that Jesus was fully equipped for his office.¹⁷

The phrase "he learned obedience from what he suffered" has, according to Lane, a long history in Greek literature. It speaks of a learning that takes place in the reception of scripture as one hears the Word of God. Jesus would have learned from scripture, and especially from the Psalms, that his passion was grounded in the saving will of God and could not be severed from his calling. The obedience through which Christ learned was the call to suffer death in accordance with the revealed will of God. In so doing, Jesus did not cling to the privileged status of being uniquely the Son of God. Rather, he receives that status from the Father after he has suffered the humiliation of death on the cross.¹⁸

F.F. Bruce looks at this from the human perspective, reminding us that the pathway of perfection which God calls his people to tread must first be trodden by the author and perfecter of our faith¹⁹. For Christ's sufferings are not just in identification with mankind,

¹⁷ Lane, 57.

¹⁸ Lane, 121.

¹⁹ F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 43.

they are ultimately for mankind, making those sufferings both voluntary and vicarious. As Raymond Brown asserts, Christ came not only to share our humanity, but to transform it.”²⁰ John Calvin puts it this way, “It may be said that Christ by his death learned fully what it was to obey God, since he was then led in a special manner to deny himself...the meaning then is that Christ was by his sufferings taught how far God ought to be submitted to and obeyed.”²¹

What were the sufferings through which Jesus suffered? He knew poverty, loneliness, fatigue, hunger, thirst, ill treatment and unbelief at the hands of family and friends, pain and death.²² In going through these sufferings Jesus modeled for his followers how to do the same. He modeled facing suffering with his eyes on the Father, knowing that God could deliver him if he desired, yet also knowing that God had a greater purpose in allowing him to experience these sufferings.

Leon Morris illustrates the value of Jesus’ suffering. He offers that suffering introduces a new perfection, what he calls a ‘perfection of testedness.’ “There is one perfection of the bud and another of the flower...In the same way there is a perfection involved in actually having suffered, and which is not implied in any previous perfection.” Morris adds that “for Christians, as for their Master, there is a perfection in suffering.”²³

John Stott agrees that Jesus was without sin but still “needed further experience and

²⁰ Brown, 58.

²¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 123-124.

²² Herbert Lockyer, *Dark Threads the Weaver Needs* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1979), 77.

²³ Leon Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 281.

opportunities in order to become mature. He was never disobedient. But his sufferings were the testing-ground in which the obedience became full-grown.”²⁴

If Jesus learned obedience from what he suffered it is not because he had never learned obedience through any other avenues of his human experience. The very act of incarnation was an act of loving obedience. In Hebrews 10:7 Jesus said that he had come to do God’s will. His life and ministry on earth were marked by obedient surrender to what God had for him to do. Even in his youth, Jesus had as his number one priority to do the will of God. Luke’s record of the twelve-year-old Jesus’ interaction with the teachers in the temple court, and his response to his parents when they asked him why he put them through three days of worry about his whereabouts, reveal this: “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?”²⁵ This priority dominated his earthly life so much that just before he went to the cross Jesus could say to the Father, “I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.”²⁶ He was always obedient to the Father, and even at the point of his greatest agony he maintained that same attitude of complete submission. And this perfect obedience, through suffering, qualified Jesus as the perfect savior (Heb. 5:9). Henry Churchill King captured this thought by writing of the cross that it “proves practically and directly effective, in winning men out of sin and into a sharing of Christ’s own purposes.”²⁷

²⁴ John R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1966), 316.

²⁵ Luke 2:49 (NIV).

²⁶ Jn. 17:4 (NIV).

²⁷ Henry Churchill King, “The Problem of Suffering and Sin III: Light from Christ,” *The Biblical World* 45, no. 3 (1915): 159.

Modern western Christianity seems to have little enthusiasm for suffering. A Google internet search for Lakewood Church, recognized in 2007 as the largest church in the United States, reveals the church slogan, “Discover the Champion in You.” Lakewood’s senior pastor, Joel Osteen, is the author of books like “Become the Better You” and “Thirty Thoughts to Victorious Living.” If Osteen’s theology is any indication of American evangelical belief, the idea of suffering simply does not compute. Suffering is not viewed as part of authentic spirituality. Instead, it is to be avoided and, if necessary, overcome, often in what seems like man’s own power.

Martin Luther might identify this theological viewpoint as similar to a prevalent theology of his day, what he called “theologia gloriae,” or theology of glory. Luther himself promoted a different type of theology, the “theologia crucis,” or theology of the cross. These two theologies represent two noticeably different ways of know God. The theology of glory looks to know and understand God through his power. The theology of the cross seeks to know and understand God through the suffering and humiliation of the cross.²⁸

Calvin contends that the experience of the Christian will be one of the cross. “For whomever the Lord has adopted and deemed worthy of his fellowship ought to prepare themselves for a hard, toilsome, and unquiet life, crammed with very many and various kinds of evil. It is the Heavenly Father’s will thus to exercise them so as to put his own children to a definite test.” Calvin argues that this is God’s plan for all his children, following Christ’s example, who while on earth “was not only tried by a perpetual cross but his whole life was

²⁸ Lucian Richard, *What Are They Saying About the Theology of Suffering?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 46.

nothing but a sort of perpetual cross.”²⁹ Does following Christ mean that suffering is a de facto aspect of becoming more like him? A brief look at Paul’s life will help to sort out the issue.

²⁹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press), 702.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE APOSTLE PAUL AND SUFFERING

The apostle Paul was no stranger to suffering. He described his hardships in a letter to the Corinthian church, listing troubles and distresses of various kinds, including beatings, imprisonments, riots, hard work, sleepless nights, and hunger.¹ Later in the same letter Paul boasts about his sufferings. In comparison to others Paul says,

“I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked. I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food. I have been cold and naked.²

Suffering for Paul was no abstract question; it was his daily life. This evoked a pressing question for Paul; the question of why Christians, who have already begun to experience the powers of the age to come, should be subjected to more affliction than others. And there was also the question of why Paul, a faithful apostle of the Lord Jesus, should have such an abundance of suffering in his own life and ministry.³

¹ 2 Cor. 6:5 (NIV).

² 2 Cor. 11:23-27 (NIV).

³ Merrill Proudfoot, *Suffering: A Christian Understanding* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 16.

Suffering, for Paul, was a way of identifying with Christ. This sense of identification with the sufferings of Christ, as well as the victory of Christ, became for Paul the foundation of his practical response to his suffering.⁴ For like Jesus, Paul learned genuineness through suffering. Chamblin argues that “the experience of ‘always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake’ (2 Cor. 4:11) freed him from having to insist on his rights: what right does an executed victim have? He is also free to be real: what need is there for phoniness if one is about to die?”⁵ The prospect of Paul’s imminent death caused Paul to rely not on himself but on God. Through his experience of a thorn in the flesh, described in 2 Cor. 12:7-10, Paul gained a deeper understanding about false and true ways of self-fulfillment. His troubles drew him to other people, both for the sake of consoling them with God’s truth and for him to find solace in their company.⁶

Paul describes his struggle against sin in Romans 7:14-25. This account has been interpreted in three ways, either as (1) an autobiographical account of Paul’s pre-conversion experience, (2) a non-autobiographical account that depicts humanity in general, or the Jews in particular, apart from Christ and under the law, or (3) Paul’s own account of his experience of the Christian life.⁷ From the standpoint of Paul’s own experience, whether it was his struggle with sin, with sickness or hardships and afflictions that accompanied his ministry, suffering is central to his life. “I die every day,” is what he says in 1 Cor. 15:31.

⁴ John Bowker, *Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 74.

⁵ Knox Chamblin, *Paul and the Self: Apostolic Teaching for Personal Wholeness* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 191.

⁶ Chamblin, 170.

⁷ Chamblin, 171.

He was among those who always carried around in their body the death of Jesus.⁸ Thus the main explanation for Paul's suffering, as for Christ's, is found in its effect on other believers and their relationship to God. Paul says "So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you."⁹

Paul's goal was not to avoid suffering but rather to know it. In the letter to the church at Colossae he wrote, "Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church."¹⁰ The suffering Paul wants to know is the suffering of Christ. "I want to know Christ and power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead."¹¹ Paul knows that it is through partnership with Christ's sufferings that suffering fulfills a redemptive purpose and gains a resurrection perspective.

Theologian L. Ann Jervis contends that Paul's pursuit of Christ's suffering was not due to the fact that Christ gave Paul and other believers an appetite for suffering. It is that Christ actually shares in Paul's suffering. Paul considered his suffering to be much more valuable than anything he could secure in his flesh. For Paul, the fellowship of sharing in Christ's suffering is priceless, far outweighing any security he might find in the flesh. For

⁸ 2 Cor. 4:10 (NIV).

⁹ 2 Cor. 4:12 (NIV).

¹⁰ Col. 1:24 (NIV).

¹¹ Phil. 3:10-11 (NIV).

Paul, to gain what Christ offers cannot be capitalized on without accepting the same loss as Christ did.¹²

In regard to his ministry, Paul understood his approval by God to be connected to his own willingness to suffer. He refers to struggles he faced and how he preached the gospel “in spite of strong opposition.”¹³ Near the end of his life, Paul’s closing remarks issued a reminder to Timothy of the apostle’s view: “For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”¹⁴ Fighting the fight and finishing the race are two athletic metaphors used by Paul to reveal his life full of struggle and he strains forward toward God’s call in Christ. He also spoke of having been tested by God and of being in the position of receiving God’s approval (“men approved by God” in 1 Thes. 2:4). Although he does not call this testing “suffering,” he does write of it almost immediately after writing about his preaching of the word in the face of great opposition (1 Thes. 2:2). Jervis sees it as “no great leap to connect Paul’s reference to capacity for struggle with God’s testing of and approval of him.”¹⁵

Jervis connects Paul’s willingness to suffer for the sake of the gospel to his thinking about his own sanctification. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul unites his righteous and

¹² L. Ann Jervis, *At the Heart of the Gospel: Suffering and the Earliest Christian Message* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 54.

¹³ 1 Thes. 2:2 (NIV).

¹⁴ 2 Tim. 4:6-7 (NIV).

¹⁵ Jervis, 25.

blameless behavior with his willingness to extend himself beyond the norm for the sake of the church of the Thessalonians (2:9-10). Jervis comments, “He sees his sanctity manifest in his capacity to accept hardship for the sake of others, thereby intimating that he may have interpreted his afflictions as necessary for his growth toward God.”¹⁶

Yet Jervis argues that Paul does not address whether or not suffering contributes to growth in holiness for any other believers. She understands Paul as saying that his own hardships in preaching the gospel are part of what brought him divine approval but stops short of acknowledging that Paul related the Thessalonians’ suffering to their commendable holiness.¹⁷ She portrays Paul’s holiness as the needle through which the threads of faith, hope, and love are threaded. And she acknowledges that the Thessalonians became people who both exhibited faith, hope, and love and who also suffered, and that their faith, hope, and love are expressed through their suffering. But she declines to call this part of their sanctification.¹⁸ Instead, she underlines Paul’s calling the church to strive, not to suffer, toward sanctification. “Paul does not say that his growth in perfection requires his *suffering*. He says rather that his growth in perfection requires his *striving*.”¹⁹

Paul’s own example was as the righteous sufferer who strove for the upward call of God. The most significant point in Paul’s thesis is that his striving was as one seized

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Jervis, 30.

¹⁸ Jervis, 20.

¹⁹ Jervis, 52.

by Christ (“...I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.”²⁰). Suffering is part and parcel of Paul’s constituted efforts in growing toward holiness. As Chamblin reminds us, “Paul interprets his sufferings as identification with Christ crucified. His suffering must be perpetual, for suffering is requisite for the divine power.”²¹ Another remarkable Christian, Julian of Norwich, demonstrates well a life lived according to this truth.

²⁰ Phil. 3:12 (NIV).

²¹ Chamblin, 188.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE ROLE OF SUFFERING IN THE LIFE OF CHRIST'S FOLLOWERS

Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) is considered one of the greatest of the English mystics. She prayed that she would experience the pain of observing the Passion of Christ, the pain of a bodily sickness that would be so grievous that both she and those around her would be convinced that she had gone past the point of death, and see wounds of repentance that would create in her compassion and a great longing for God.¹ Her prayers were answered, and to her great gratitude, perhaps because she understood that pain is a necessary dimension to spiritual growth.

Whether or not Julian of Norwich was correct in her understanding concerning the necessity of suffering for the Christian, her testimony speaks of the expectation and experience of Christians throughout the ages regarding the cost of following Christ. Puritan Richard Baxter coined the phrase “the art of suffering” to refer to the sufferer’s state of mind in response to various kinds of painful events that had a divine purpose. For Baxter, the doctrine of providence located every facet of life in every individual Christ-follower within the knowledge, will, and power of God.² Divine providence suggests that all the unfortunate

¹ Rod Burton, *Spiritual Pain: “A Brief Overview and Spiritual Response Within the Christian Tradition,”* *The Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, 57 (2003): 441.

² Ann Thompson, *The Art of Suffering and the Impact of Seventeenth Century Anti-Providential Thought* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), 1 and 5.

things that occur in the world have a larger purpose and will ultimately tend to the good, as orchestrated by the loving sovereignty of God. This doctrine gives Christian suffering and affliction meaning. The suffering of Christians is thus no mistake; it is the very will of God for their lives.³

Alister McGrath points out that in a logical or philosophical sense, the actual fact of suffering is neutral. But that does not prevent the Christian from gaining an appreciation of where suffering fits in life. “The most important thing is what we make of it, both in terms of how we understand it, and in terms of how we allow it to affect us. Here is where theology helps; it allows us to see suffering in a positive light, as a means of growth rather than as something meaningless. We can learn to offer our sufferings and distress to God, assured that he can and will use them to bring us to new depths of faith and service.”⁴

Chamblin echoes a similar theme when he says, “Whatever the cause or occasion of suffering, God means to address his children in that very place, and to use that experience to make them more like Christ.”⁵ Similarly, John Stott remarks, “If suffering was the means by which the sinless Christ became mature, so much more do we need it in our sinfulness...Just as suffering led to maturity through obedience for Christ, so it leads to maturity through perseverance for us.”⁶

³ Stan van Hooft, “The Meanings of Suffering,” *The Hastings Center Report* 28, no. 5 (1998): 15.

⁴ Alister E. McGrath, *Suffering and God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 71.

⁵ Knox Chamblin, *Paul and the Self: Apostolic Teaching for Personal Wholeness* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 170.

⁶ John R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1966), 316.

Leon Morris sees the working out of a type of perfection in suffering, where the fires of affliction forge the qualities of Christian character in the individual believer. Suffering can be evil but not unmitigated evil, since it is also the means by which the Holy Spirit increases Christ-likeness.⁷ But for the Christian to experience trials, afflictions, temptation, and sufferings, and to see them as something within the will of God for his or her life, that Christian must have an every enlarging view of God and his redemptive process.

Men and women whom Christ calls to faithfulness and holiness are drawn into battle with sin and all its agencies. Sometimes suffering is a direct result of the believer's sin or of the sins of those closest to them. Scripture clearly portrays some suffering as God's chastisement of sin. God frequently disciplines his children to enable them to acknowledge their sin. At times they resist his Spirit, and attempt to shift the blame onto someone or something else, even when it is obvious that the person has caused his or her own suffering.⁸ Psalm 32 portrays the response of a person who came to an honest dealing with their own sin: "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord' – and you forgave the guilt of my sin."⁹

Of course, not all suffering in the life of the Christian is a result of sin. It is necessary to consider alongside retributive and disciplinary suffering the complementary principle of

⁷ Leon Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 281.

⁸ Dan G. McCartney, *Why Does It Have to Hurt: The Meaning of Christian Suffering*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1998), 82.

⁹ Ps. 32:3-5 (NIV).

educational suffering. God often afflicts his people for the purpose of teaching them, and chastening and corrections from the hand of God may often look like pain, suffering, and anguish. But God is using it all to teach his people how to be his people.¹⁰ Henry Churchill King argues that as God's people, called to love one another and to love a lost world, Christians cannot avoid the call to suffer. "Because we love, and in proportion as we love, we must suffer and choose to suffer."¹¹ King contends that companionship in suffering is part of the privilege of entering into relationship with others in their darkest hours, much like the disciples were asked by Jesus to wait and watch with him in the Garden of Gethsemane.

In the book, *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis wrote that now famous quote, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."¹² Lewis went on to write that pain as God's megaphone is a terrible instrument in that it does not guarantee success in terms of sanctification. It can, instead, lead to final rebellion without repentance. But what the pain of suffering will do, according to Lewis, is plant "the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul."¹³ For the redemptive effect of suffering lies mainly in its tendency to reduce the strength of the rebel will. Lewis pointed out that this differs from ascetic practices, which do just the opposite – they strengthen the will and are only useful in that they enable the will to have some control

¹⁰ Walter Kaiser, Jr., *A Biblical Approach to Personal Suffering* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982), 123.

¹¹ Henry Churchill King, "The Problem of Suffering and Sin III: Light from Christ," *The Biblical World* 45, No. 3 (1915): 154.

¹² C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962; reprint, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 83.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 85.

over earthly passions.¹⁴ Pain does its redemptive work best by shattering man's self-sufficiency and allowing him to learn the sufficiency that can be found only in God.¹⁵

Lewis saw pain as part of man's cure. Man's cure is painful because man is not merely an imperfect creature who must be improved; instead man is a rebel who must lay down his arms. To give up self-will is what Lewis calls a 'grievous pain.' He continues, "To surrender a self-will inflamed and swollen with years of usurpation is a kind of death."¹⁶

Lewis understood that self-surrender demands pain. The action of surrendering the will to God, in order to be pure, must be done from a pure will to obey. This indicates the necessity to die daily, since more often than not, just when we think we have broken the rebellion of self, we find that it is still alive and well. "That this process cannot be without pain is sufficiently witnessed by the very great history of the word 'mortification.'"¹⁷

Lewis identified four-fifths of man's suffering as being caused by the wickedness of men's souls that led them to hurt one another. Yet much of man's suffering, Lewis argued, could not be traced to man at all. This led, for Lewis, to the problem of reconciling human suffering with the existence of a loving God. The solution for Lewis was to stop looking at the issue from a man-centered point of view. "God does not exist for the sake of man. Man does not exist for his own sake...we were made not primarily that we may love God (though we were made for that, too) but that God may love us."¹⁸ Lewis explained

¹⁴ Ibid., 100.

¹⁵ Ibid., 91.

¹⁶ Ibid., 81.

¹⁷ Ibid., 82.

¹⁸ Ibid., 43.

much of human suffering in the context of God laboring to make man more lovable.

How long does the Christian have to anticipate pain and suffering to be a part of his or her experience? For Lewis, the answer is tied to the necessity of the experience. “If tribulation is a necessary element in redemption, we must anticipate that it will never cease till God sees that world to be either redeemed or no further redeemable.”¹⁹ Suffering teaches the Christian that what the world offers was never intended to possess his or her heart. Christ is the only real treasure. Or as Lewis asserted, “Our Father refreshes us on the journey with some pleasant inns, but will not encourage us to mistake them for home.”²⁰

One other important aspect of suffering to consider is the concept that when Christians suffer they are sharing in the sufferings of God. Whether or not God can experience suffering (God’s impassibility) is not the scope of this thesis paper; numerous writers suggest that believers do, in fact, share in God’s suffering. Rod Burton writes, “Is it realistic to imagine that a journey into the heart of god will not involve significant experiences of pain? The one who willingly undertook the kenosis of the incarnation, who loved us even to death, and whose suffering body is manifest throughout this world, cannot be apathetic.”²¹ In 1924 F.J. McConnell wrote, “The Christian comes after a while to realize that the greatest part of the pain which he suffers is not his, but God’s. God is not sharing his pain as truly as he is sharing God’s. Then he sees that in a measure he is

¹⁹ Ibid., 102.

²⁰ Ibid., 103.

²¹ Rod Burton, “Spiritual Pain: A Brief Overview and an Initial Response Within the Christian Tradition,” *The Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling* 57, No. 4 (2003): 441.

privileged to share his suffering of the cross.”²²

It is at the cross that the Christian finds meaning in his or her suffering. Richard writes, “The Christian understanding of God has its root in an historical event: the cross. The way of history is the way of the cross, and the cross is the way into the Trinitarian God. It is not creation that leads us to God, but the cross.”²³ Ohlrich adds, “The model for longsuffering is God, so our contemplation of him leads us to persevere. The writer of Hebrews tells us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus who endured the cross. When we consider his example of longsuffering, we are encouraged to follow in his steps.”²⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “Christians range themselves with God in his suffering; that is what distinguishes them from the heathen...It is not some religious act which makes a Christian what he is, but participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world.”²⁵

The death and resurrection of Jesus needs to determine the matter in which Christians relate their experience of suffering to hope. Christian Beker asserts, “For just as the death of Christ embraces the various forms of suffering in our lives, so the resurrection of Christ must be the ground of our hope. Thereby, these various forms of suffering are not simply

²² F.J. McConnell, *Is God Limited?* (New York: Abingdon, 1924), 293.

²³ Lucian Richard, *What Are They Saying About the Theology of Suffering?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 47.

²⁴ Charles Ohlrich, *The Suffering of God: Hope and Comfort for Those Who Hurt* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982), 115.

²⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Huntington, NY: Fontana, 1953), 122-123.

meaningless, because they do not have the last word in God's world."²⁶ H. Wheeler Robinson echoes that idea when he finds the Christian solution to the problem of suffering is found "when the sufferer, discovering that God suffers with him, can 'live it through' in his own life and the lives of others." For Robinson, God's suffering is redemptive, however, only as it is revealed and understood in the doctrine and experience of the cross. It then becomes "the bond of creative fellowship."²⁷ In fact, suffering offers the Christian a possibility of communion with Christ on the deepest level, and gives evidence that they are on the way to the fulfillment of our union with the Lord.²⁸

There is no doubt that the Bible indicates that those who follow Christ will suffer. Thus far this thesis has argued that this suffering is purposeful, even necessary, in the process of sanctification. Scripture uses three metaphors to describe the way God uses suffering to increase Christlikeness in his children. It is to a discussion of these three metaphors that we now turn.

²⁶ Christian Beker, *Suffering and Hope: The Biblical Vision of the Human Predicament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 29.

²⁷ H. Wheeler Robinson, *Suffering: Human and Divine* (New York: Macmillan, 1939), x.

²⁸ Merrill Proudfoot, *Suffering: A Christian Understanding* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 30.

CHAPTER SIX

THREE BIBLICAL METAPHORS OF CHRISTIAN SUFFERING

In his seminal work on the cross, Anglican John Stott identifies three graphic images in scripture which illustrate the way in which God uses suffering in relation to his purposes to make us holy. These three images, or metaphors, are (1) a father disciplining his children, (2) a metalworker refining silver and gold, and (3) a gardener pruning his vine.¹ This chapter explores in some detail each of these three metaphors as a way of understanding the role of suffering in our sanctification.

The Father Disciplining His Children

The father-children image is taken up first in Deuteronomy, where Moses says, “Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you.”² The context of this statement is the warnings that Moses gives the people that they be careful to follow all the commands so that they can enjoy the fruit of the promises of God. In recounting the hardships of the people in their desert experience, Moses reminds them that God was humbling them and testing them to see if they would consistently trust in God’s provision. God’s provision was remarkable, including manna from heaven to eat and clothes

¹ John R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1966), 316.

² Deut. 8:5 (NIV).

that did not wear out through forty years of desert wanderings. But Moses is concerned that the people would forget the Lord, and so he admonishes them to continue to “observe the command of the Lord your God, walking in his ways and revering him.”³

J.A. Thompson points out the educational nature of the desert experiences and affirms that the methodology God used was not unique to one occasion. “Often in the Old Testament God is shown as sending suffering to humble and discipline his servants so that they might learn lessons they would otherwise miss, e.g. the testing of Abraham, Job, Joseph, Jeremiah.”⁴ R.K. Harrison comments that such discipline, among the Semites, was intended to inculcate reformation and righteousness in the offspring.⁵

The metaphor is taken up again in the book of Proverbs, where the saying stresses the father’s discipline as evidence of his love for his children. The third chapter of Proverbs highlights the childlike trust placed by the man of God in wisdom’s sound teaching, leading him to bold obedience. Solomon writes, “My son, do not despise the Lord’s discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.”⁶ Not despising means not rejecting, a tough assignment when resentment is a natural reaction to hardship. But to follow the path of resentment would mean negating the chapter’s keynote theme of childlike trust. It requires an act of both the will and the

³ Deut. 8:6 (NIV).

⁴ J.A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 136.

⁵ R.K. Harrison, “Deuteronomy,” in *The New Bible Commentary, Revised*, eds. Donald Guthrie and J.A. Motyer, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 216.

⁶ Prov. 3:11-12 (NIV).

emotions to accept the Lord's discipline. But this acceptance is made easier by the remembrance that the discipline is cloaked in the father's love and delight.⁷

These verses from Proverbs are quoted in the letter to the Hebrews. Hebrews addresses urban Jewish-background Christians facing difficult times. These Christians were asking the question of whether or not their faith in Christ was well-placed since their experience in life was filled with much trial and persecution. The author of Hebrews answers this supposed question, chapter by chapter, with the same response to each differing complaint or concern: Jesus is the reason for your present experience, and he is the answer to your every need.

In Hebrews 12:5-11 the author reminds his readers that their status in God's eyes is that of chosen sons. He quotes Proverbs 3:11-12 as a "word of encouragement" and exhorts his readers to pay attention to it. By using this passage from Proverbs the epistle identifies three possible responses among these believers to the hardships they have encountered. Some who face hardship may be (1) indifferent to them, others may become (2) overwhelmed by them, but the proper response is to (3) rejoice in them.

The insistence to not despise the discipline of the Lord indicates the possibility that some Christians may be in danger of ignoring or dismissing the fact that God's sovereign hand is at work in their adversities and suffering as well as in their joys and pleasures. God may be speaking some truth to them and about them in and through their troubles that they would never hear or understand while things were going well with them. Perhaps it is a call to renew their confidence in God's providential care or a call to fresh willingness to follow

⁷ Derek Kinder, *Proverbs* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 64.

him in obedience no matter what the outcome of their immediate difficulties. Perhaps these readers needed to undergo discipline in order that they would seek God's will and not their own wishes, even if it meant being prepared to go through any experience on the way to a greater likeness to their Lord and Savior Jesus.⁸

Secondly, other Christians going through adversity and suffering might become overwhelmed. When this happens they could become discouraged as hardships overtake them, leading to a sense of despondency and the feeling of having been forsaken by their Lord. The author reminds them that it would be a great mistake to interpret their present experience in this way. Christians who go through trouble have to keep in mind that the God who tests them is also the God who helps them. His promise is to never test them beyond their strength but to always provide grace sufficient for the occasion of their adversities. As Paul said it, "...God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear."⁹

Thirdly, scripture maintains that Christians should actually rejoice in their sufferings. This is true since the Lord disciplines those whom he loves. The challenge of hardship and suffering, persecution and adversity, temptations and trials, need not drive Christians to despair. Those who are not loved in this way by God are not tested by him. As Raymond Brown interprets it, "The devil is content to leave most of his subjects in the superficial 'peace' of spiritual apathy and ignorance. Those who are in the Lord's company are sure to

⁸ Raymond Brown, *Christ Above All: The Message of Hebrews* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1982): 232.

⁹ 1 Cor. 10:13b (NIV).

be wounded by the arrows which are constantly directed at Christ himself.”¹⁰ These sufferings offer proof that those who endure them belong to God’s family.

The encouragement thus gleaned from these verses has primarily to do with the identity of these believers. Theirs is the true sonship – accepted by God as sons and daughters. The encouragement is further developed in that fatherly discipline marks true sons from those that are illegitimate. “Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father or our spirits and live!”¹¹ These verses affirm that (1) the father treasures his children, (2) the father corrects his children, and (3) the father equips his children. The first point answers the concern of those who suffer and therefore question whether or not they truly belong to God. They are reminded that their adoption into God’s family brings both privilege and adversity. The second point affirms that any father who cares for his children wants them to grow up into maturity, and that process always involves discipline and correction. Without those components of parenting the children would never move beyond immaturity. Thirdly, the discipline of the father is indeed part of the equipping of the children. Fathers who love their children do more than issue orders that require obedient actions. They do all that is within their power to assist their children in keeping the very commands they have issued to them. If earthly fathers do this in part, the “Father of our spirits” is able to do this perfectly. And as Christians respond to their Father’s correction,

¹⁰ Brown, 233.

¹¹ Heb. 12:7-9 (NIV).

they find enhanced life. By refusing to submit to the Father of their spirits, they would do no more than bring spiritual death upon themselves.

The author of this epistle is able to claim these remarkable truths because he is convinced that God's fathering is indeed done in such a way that it meets the needs of each of his sons. And this discipline is essentially purposeful and effectively useful in the hands of God. Verses 10 and 11 affirm that God's discipline is different than that of human parents, who at times use discipline not primarily for the good of the child but for their own purpose and pleasure. But God always disciplines his children for *their* good. This means that there is an immediate benefit from the sufferings Christians experience as they are used by God as part of the process of discipline. Brown remarks,

By his very nature as our loving and generous Father, he could not possibly introduce any form of discipline into our lives which would not be of real help to us. More than all else, he longs that we might *share his holiness*; our closeness to God in sanctification often becomes far more real to us in the grim and difficult episodes of life. Adversity sometimes helps us to enter more fully into our indebtedness to God, our partnership with Christ and our reliance on the Spirit. In this way we can more fully *share his holiness*.¹²

The epistle's author agrees that no discipline is pleasant at the time; in fact, it is painful. But Christians are encouraged to always keep in mind the ultimate usefulness of their experience of hardship, since "Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."¹³ It may take time, just as it takes time for a tree once planted to produce fruit. But the fruit that is worth the wait is that of righteousness and peace that is produced by the Father in their lives. Such discipline, through suffering, cannot be

¹² Brown, 235.

¹³ Heb. 12:11b (NIV).

considered in vain. Those trained in such a way know that it will require great effort but will result in great reward.

This metaphor of the father providing discipline for his sons is echoed in Christ's letter to the Laodicean church in the Revelation 3:19, where Christ says "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline." Eugene Peterson identifies this statement as part of the three-fold spiritual direction which Christ institutes in the church, consisting of affirmation, correction, and motivation. This three-part spiritual direction trains the church in a life of confident faith in Christ in a hostile environment. The process, according to Peterson, is what the Greeks called *paideia* (from *paideua*, "to chastise"), the process whereby the community passes on its passion and excellence from one generation to the next. Peterson sees the correcting aspect of this training involved in seven areas, where the church is trained to love (Ephesus), to suffer (Smyrna), to tell the truth (Pergamum), to be holy (Thyatira), to be authentic (Sardis), to be in mission (Philadelphia), and worship (Laodicea).¹⁴

J.A. Thompson argues that God's methods in dealing with his church have not changed over the centuries. "The family of God still learns lessons through suffering."¹⁵ John Calvin would agree, commenting that "As long as we live we are with regard to God no more than children and this is the reason why the rod should ever be applied to our backs."¹⁶ He continues, "For if no one is to be found among us, at least no prudent man and of a sound judgment, who does not correct his children – for without discipline they cannot be led to a

¹⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 53.

¹⁵ J.A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 136.

¹⁶ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 317.

right conduct – how much less will God neglect so necessary a remedy, who is the best and wisest Father?”¹⁷

Other church fathers have taken the same approach. John Chrysostom of the fourth century and Oecumenius of the tenth interpret the Hebrew account similarly, both asserting that God’s discipline confirms our status as his sons. Chrysostom denounces the idea that the suffering of evils meant that God hated the individual. Oecumenius sees the sufficiency of God’s correction when he comments, “For human fathers do not always prevail to discipline us so that they can render us perfect, but God always disciplines us and makes us perfect. For the process of discipline stops when the father dies or the child comes of age.”¹⁸ Fifth century bishop Theodoret of Cyr adds, “Fathers are in the habit of disciplining their true children, and if they see them caned by their teachers, they do not worry, they see the fruit coming from the discipline. But they despise illegitimate children and do not accord them equal attention. So if you avoid discipline, you are of the number of the illegitimate.”¹⁹

C.S. Lewis affirms something similar in writing that “The Father uses his authority to make the son into the sort of human being he, rightly, in his superior wisdom, wants him to be.”²⁰ Guthrie points out that any father who fails to discipline his son is deficient in his capacity as a father, and any son who escapes all such discipline is losing out on his sonship. “God’s knowledge of us is perfect and he does what is for our good, for he understands what

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Erik M. Heen and Philip D.W. Krey, eds., *Hebrews*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2005), 215.

¹⁹ Ibid., 214.

²⁰ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 40.

discipline is needed.”²¹ Christ wants us to be made into sons like himself, and he has a specific aim that we may share in his holiness. Lockyer declares that afflictions and chastisement are always sent by God in love. The very meaning of chastisement affirms this, since its original meaning is “to bring up or rear a child, to train, to instruct, educate, correct. – hence the Greek proverb, “To learn is to suffer.” Lockyer asserts that this implies chastisement as a way of nourishment, or something good for us.²² Finally, Bruce agrees that it is the most natural thing in the world for a son to learn obedience by suffering. This obedience is often learned because of the unpleasant consequences which follow disobedience. But our God can always be trusted in his estimation of our condition and our need. “Our heavenly father, in the perfection of his wisdom and love, can be relied upon never to impose any discipline on us that is not for our good. The supreme good that he has in view for his children is this, that they should share in his holiness.”²³

In one of his books on parenting, Dr. James Dobson recounts a story from *Smithsonian Magazine* that featured a stone carver from England named Simon Verrity, who honed his craft by restoring English cathedrals dating from the thirteenth century. As he worked, Verrity would listen to the song of the stone under his careful blows – a solid strike would signal all is well, a higher-pitched ping would signal trouble. With the wrong work of his hammer a chunk of rock could be wrongly broken off. Verrity would constantly adjust the angle of his chisel and the force of his mallet to the pitch, and would frequently pause to

²¹ Donald Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 254.

²² Herbert Lockyer, *Dark Threads the Weaver Needs* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1979), 93.

²³ F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 359.

run his hand over the freshly carved surface. Dobson explained that Verrity knew the significance of his work, and the wrong move could cause irreversible damage to his work of art. His success was tied to his ability to read the signals being sung by his stones. Dobson calls for parents, in a way similar to Verrity, to listen carefully to the “music” of their children, especially during times of correction and confrontation. He says, “It takes a great deal of patience and sensitivity to discern how the child is responding. If you listen carefully, boys and girls will tell you what they’re thinking and feeling. By honing your craft, you too can become a master carver who creates a beautiful work of art.”²⁴

The wonderful promise of the biblical analogy of God as a father disciplining his children is that he is a father with perfect pitch, always able to discern exactly what his children need and equally able to provide the discipline they require to grow into maturity and wholeness. Part of that discipline involves the necessary suffering that molds and shapes character into the likeness of Christ and trust into fullness of expression like that of a child with its loving parent. God’s discipline and its purpose in the lives of Christians is always in love and for their good.

The Metalworker Refining Silver or Gold

The next metaphor of God’s corrective work in the lives of his people is that of the metalworker refining silver or gold. The image of refining, using the terminology of metallurgy, is found in several Old Testament passages, including Is. 1:25, Jer. 6:27-30, and Ez. 22:18-22. The figure of the necessary refining of gold by fire was a common one in the

²⁴ James Dobson, *Bringing Up Boys* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 2001), 229-230.

Greco-Roman world, and ranged from the simple observation that fire tests and improves gold to the metaphor that as fire tests gold, misery tests brave men, indeed that God uses afflictions to harden men to serve him.²⁵ This metaphorical use of the concept of God as a metalworker refining silver and gold occurs in three other places in the Old Testament. In each case it is clear that the place of refinement for Israel was the furnace of affliction.

Psalm 66:10 says, “For you, O God, tested us; you refined us like silver.” This testing or refining was through suffering. The Psalm continues in verses 11-12, “You brought us into prison and laid burdens on our backs. You let men ride over our heads; we went through fire and water...” Derek Kidner asserts that the biblical habit of seeing the hand of God in all of life’s events makes suffering as meaningful as the deliverance that follows it; “but you brought us to a place of abundance” (v. 12b). The searching scrutiny of being tested and the discipline of being refined shaped the people’s understanding of the life and security they enjoyed as gifts, not rights.²⁶ The affliction the nation experienced led to a change in their thinking and their behavior, as verses 12-14 indicate: “I will come to your temple with burnt offerings and fulfill my vows to you - vows my lips promised and my mouth spoke when I was in trouble.”

The circumstances of the nation’s testing are not clear in this psalm. Some commentators suggest that the psalmist is looking back to the Exodus experience, but most see something of more recent events in the psalmist’s view, perhaps the Assyrian threat during the reign of Hezekiah. It could have been the presence in the vicinity of Jerusalem of

²⁵ Paul J. Achtemeier, *I Peter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 101.

²⁶ Kidner, Derek, *Psalms 1-72: An Introduction and Commentary on Books I and II* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 234.

an immense Assyrian army, known for their atrocious cruelties, terrible and inhuman. The Assyrians flayed alive many of their captives; their art shows more of the human anatomy without the skin than with it.²⁷ Wilcox comments, “Such testing, whether long ago, or recent, or both, is very clearly seen to be God’s doing. The repeated “you” in verses 10-12 parallels that in 65:9-11. Both psalms go behind second causes to see God as the first cause of everything. There, it was the blessings of harvest; here it is the hardships of discipline, for which he is responsible. He is a God who knows exactly what he is doing, both in the happy times and in the hard times.”²⁸

An episode in Isaiah gives an indication of how God works to redirect the thinking in his people. The prophet Isaiah records God’s own description of using the refining process in the lives of his people in chapter 48:8-11:

You have neither heard nor understood;
 from of old your ear has not been open.
 Well do I know how treacherous you are;
 you were called a rebel from birth.

For my own name's sake I delay my wrath;
 for the sake of my praise I hold it back from you,
 so as not to cut you off.

See, I have refined you, though not as silver;
 I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.

For my own sake, for my own sake, I do this.
 How can I let myself be defamed?
 I will not yield my glory to another.

²⁷ James Burton Coffman and Thelma B. Coffman, *Commentary on Psalms 1-72* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1992), 544.

²⁸ Michael Wilcox, *The Message of Psalms 1-72*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 231.

Israel does not seem to have the knowledge or even the ear to hear divine truth. Their pretense of having such knowledge is treacherous and indicates their rebelliousness. God's judgment on his people would be just, but he has something more in mind. His forbearance arises from his own motives, and he will not destroy Israel.

In what one commentary describes as “an impassioned outburst,”²⁹ God promises to save his people from annihilation by withholding his anger directed at their rebellious behavior. The reason for his restraint is so that God alone will be glorified. God brings glory to himself, in part, through the shaping of his people. In this case God describes the refining of his people, comparing it to the refining of silver, which was melted in order to rid it of base components. But this particular refining is described as “not as silver” (v. 10). Calvin suggests that if God refined the people as silver they would be altogether consumed; silver contains something pure, the people were all dross. And Motyer puts it this way: “A process that could only have ended in Israel's death has been curtailed; *silver* is left in the crucible till the dross has gone but Israel's silver is all dross.”³⁰

God did not wish to destroy the people of Judah, but to refine them. Calvin interprets this in saying, “Accordingly, in the very ‘trial’ the Lord considers what we can endure, so as not to proceed beyond measure; and, at the same time, by the secret influence of his Spirit, he makes those punishments to be profitable to us which would otherwise have been

²⁹ Chris Franke, *Isaiah 46, 47, and 48: A New Literary-Critical Reading*, Biblical and Judaic Studies, vol. 3 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 254.

³⁰ J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 379.

destruction.”³¹ The furnace of affliction is a classic reference to Egypt. The furnace of refining at this point in history is a return to exile, this time at the hands of the Babylonians. The verses that follow indicate that the Lord is at work here, doing a new thing, even pointing toward the future redemption of his people by Cyrus.

The appearance of this refining metaphor appears in Zechariah within the short poem of 13:7-9 that describes the striking of the shepherd and the scattering of the sheep. The verses describe a battle in which most of the sheep, the people of Israel and Judah, are destroyed in battle. Only a third of the sheep are left after these events, a remnant that will encounter even more suffering. But their suffering will result in a glorious outcome. “This third I will bring into the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say, 'They are my people,' and they will say, 'The LORD is our God.’”³² This verse indicates that they will pass through this suffering like silver or gold being refined in the fire, and afterwards they will call on God and he will answer them. Out of the suffering that will usher in the kingdom of God will emerge a new, cleansed, people of God, who will really know him. The covenant relationship between God and his people will be restored. Barry Webb points out that there is a connection between the cleaning of the furnace in verse 9 with the cleaning that comes from the fountain in the first verse of the chapter (“On that day a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse her from sin and impurity”). The continued cleansing comes only via the hard discipline of suffering. “We need the furnace as well as the fountain

³¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Prophet Isaiah, Vol. III*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 475.

³² Zech. 13:9 (NIV).

if we are to be as God wants us to be. That is why suffering should not cause us to lose heart, or to feel (when it comes) that God has somehow abandoned us. It is a vital and precious part of his way with us; he ‘disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness’ (Heb. 12:10).³³

Mark Boda sees this refining imagery in the context of remnant theology, the idea that from sinful humanity God forms a holy community. This activity of God can be traced from the early chapters of Genesis, when God sets apart one family as his remnant, to his choosing of a people to be his holy nation, through the law and prophets where God’s design is the ongoing purification of this people. In the New Testament Jesus is presented as the remnant of Israel, the embodiment of the nation, and the remnant of the Davidic line. Jesus’ death is the ultimate expression of exile at the hands of foreign nations. His call to the church to take up the cross and follow him becomes an exilic experience, with the theme of the church undergoing refining through suffering.³⁴

Peter applies the image of the furnace of affliction to the lives of New Testament believers. In 1 Peter chapter one Peter encourages his readers with the thought that they have a great hope and an inheritance that will never fade, even while they wait for the coming fullness of their salvation. All this, he says, is through Jesus Christ. Yet their present experience does not reflect these wonderful realities. Peter writes, “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though

³³ Barry G. Webb, *The Message of Zechariah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 170-171.

³⁴ Mark J. Boda, *Haggai, Zechariah* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 516-517.

refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”³⁵

Peter claims that contemplating salvation (vv. 2-5) and its coming climax generates great joy. The problem facing these Christians in Asia Minor is that they are suffering all kinds of trials. Peter’s contemplation of these two opposing realities triggers a chain-saying, a traditional form of expression. It is a joy-in-suffering expression, not unlike similar ones found in James and Romans, and is likely an application of the sayings of Jesus.³⁶ Peter indicates that these believers should rejoice in spite of their trials. He is not denying the reality of their pain and suffering but is recognizing that their suffering is temporary. Their suffering is under the control of a sovereign God even if it is not a part of God’s ideal world. This suffering seems to be externally caused, coming from outside of the believers but resulting in difficult internal affects. Peter believes there is purpose in their suffering, a purpose that has to do with the strengthening of their faith. Whereas gold perishes when it is refined by fire, Peter says that their faith will endure times of persecution and suffering and prove to be genuine on that last day. Peter thus sees in suffering a situation from which Christians can learn and grow.³⁷

The words of 1 Peter carry an eschatological flavor and imply that the results of the testing will not be seen until the final judgment, an implication confirmed by the reference to

³⁵ 1 Pet. 1:6-7 (NIV).

³⁶ Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 55.

³⁷ Scott McKnight, *The NIV Application Commentary on 1 Peter* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 72.

the return of Christ. Thus these trials can be greeted with joy, since they are necessary if faith is to have the kind of proved character that God finds acceptable at the final judgment.³⁸

This test-of-faith theme is found throughout scripture. Abraham was tested, and was found faithful (Gen. 22:1). Israel was also tested as a nation and often failed the test (e.g., Num. 14:20-24). The Jews were well aware that those who were faithful to God were often put to the test by suffering, whether from economic persecution to physical violence. The goal of those administering the trials may have been to cause believers, in the Old Testament or New Testament, to lose hope and abandon their faith. But Peter argues that these trials, although intended as a detriment to faith, actually could be turned to their benefit. That benefit would be the proving the authentic nature of their faith; commitment found to be genuine, which Peter suggests is more valuable in the sight of God than any earthly treasure.

³⁹ The metaphor holds true: gold was considered the most precious of metals, and it was in fact tested by fire, which burned off any impurities rather than damaged the pure metal (1 Cor. 3:12-14). And yet as precious as gold was, it, like all other earthly goods, would eventually perish, and long before that it would be useless to the person owning it. Only the person whose faith proved genuine would receive an eternal reward.

Peter Davids also remarks that Peter would have expected his readers to recall Apocryphal passages from the Septuagint like Wisdom of Solomon 3:5-6, “Having been disciplined a little, [the righteous] will receive great good, because God tested them and found them worthy of himself; like gold in the furnace he tried them, and like a sacrificial

³⁸ Achtemeier, 102.

³⁹ Davids, 57.

burnt offering he accepted them.” Ecclesiasticus 1-5 similarly says, “My son, if you come forward to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for temptation [trials]....For gold is tested in the fire, and acceptable men in the furnace of humiliation.” Davids remarks, “The people of northern Asia Minor would realize that Peter was pointing to tried and true wisdom.”

Edmond Clowney sums up the significance of this metallurgical metaphor for the Christian’s suffering when he states, “God sends trials to strengthen our trust in him so that our faith will not fail. Our trails keep us trusting; they burn away our self-confidence and drive us to our Saviour. The fires of affliction or persecution will not reduce our faith to ashes. Fire does not destroy gold; it only removes combustible impurities. ... Like a jeweler putting his most precious metal in the crucible, so God proves us in the furnace of trial and affliction. The genuineness of our faith shines from the fire to his praise.”⁴⁰ The seventeenth century British theologian and church bishop Robert Leighton’s commentary affirms the necessity of such a view of suffering. He writes, “How shall a man know whether his meekness and calmness of spirit be real or not, while he meets with no provocation, nothing that contradicts or crosses him?”⁴¹ It is worth quoting his continuing argument of showing that God uses afflictions and suffering for a purpose:

God delights to call forth his champions to meet with great temptations, to make them bear crosses of more than ordinary weight; just as commanders in war put men of most valour and skill upon the hardest services. God sets some strong, furious trials upon a strong Christian, made strong by his own grace, and by his victory makes it appear to the world, that though there is a great deal of the counterfeit coin of profession in religion, yet some there are, who have the power, the reality of it, and that it is not an invention, but there is truth in it; that the invincible grace, the very

⁴⁰ Edmond P. Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 52.

⁴¹ Robert Leighton, *A Practical Commentary on the First Epistle of Peter* (Grand Rapids: Kegel), 42.

Spirit of God, dwells in the hearts of true believers; that he hath a number who do not only speak big, but do indeed and in good earnest despise the world, and overcome to by His strength.⁴²

The Gardener Pruning His Vine

The third metaphor exploring the role of suffering in the lives of Christians is that of the gardener pruning his plants. Pruning is perhaps the most counterintuitive of the three metaphors since it, in certain ways, pictures a more drastic and potentially harmful activity. Pruning is, simply put, a cutting off, similar to purging metals of impurities by fire, but in pruning it is not always impurities or unhealthy growth that is removed. Sometimes the gardener will intentionally cut off healthy growth in order to shape the plant in a certain way. From a gardening standpoint, pruning is a double-edged sword, either helping or hurting the plant or tree according to if, where, when, how, and why it is applied. When properly executed, a variety of benefits can occur from pruning. These benefits include (1) reducing risk of branch and stem breakage, (2) providing better clearance for vehicles and pedestrians, (3) improving the health and appearance of the plant, (4) enhancing the landscape view, and (5) increasing flowering. However, when performed improperly, pruning can harm the tree's health, stability, and appearance. Still, all plant experts warn of the consequences of not conducting a regular pruning program. These include: (1) increasing the risk of branch and stem failure, (2) developing low, aggressive limbs, (3) forming co-dominant stems, (4) creating defects such as diseased bark and dead branches, and (5) developing obstructed landscape views. One of the most beneficial results of pruning is that

⁴² Ibid., 43.

it encourages plants and trees to grow with strong branch structure.⁴³

In horticultural terms, pruning is a tribute to the potential of a branch. It is an acknowledgement that it is already fruitful and that it has even greater potential to be more fruitful in the future. Looked at in this way, pruning is not only a mark of favor, it is also a mark of expectation on the part of the plant, vine, or tree grower.

The allegory of the vine was used by Jesus to describe the importance of both abiding and pruning in the Christian experience. John 15:1-8 records the beginning of Jesus' second upper room discourse and the last major teaching section in the gospel. The image of the vine was the one of the supreme symbols of Israel. A great golden vine trailed over the temple porch, and the coinage minted in Israel around the time of the revolt against Rome in AD 68-70 incorporated the vine symbol.⁴⁴ There are also a number of Old Testament allusions to this image, particularly in the Psalms and the prophets. For instance, Psalm 80 speaks of Israel's exodus experience as "a vine out of Egypt" and her flourishing in Palestine as a dominant vine: "The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches. It sent out its boughs to the Sea, its shoots as far as the River."⁴⁵ In Isaiah 27:2 Israel is described as "a fruitful vineyard," and in Jeremiah 2:21 God describes the nation as "a choice vine." Ezekiel 15:1-8 describes Israel as a useless vine that God will consume by fire. Hosea 10:1-2a creates a similar picture: "Israel was a spreading vine; he brought forth fruit for himself. As his fruit increased, he built more altars; as his land

⁴³ "Pruning Shade Trees in Landscapes," *Landscape Plants* (Gainesville: University of Florida IFAS Extension, 2007), available from <http://www.hort.ufl.edu/woody/pruning>, Internet; accessed 2 September 2008.

⁴⁴ Bruce Milne, *The Message of John* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 219.

⁴⁵ Ps. 80:8, 10-11 (NIV).

prospered, he adorned his sacred stones. Their heart is deceitful, and now they must bear their guilt.”

Isaiah 5:1-7 is the Song of the Vineyard. The vineyard reference was associated with the Lord’s preservation of a remnant of Zion. God has been about the business of protecting and nurturing his vineyard people. But in 5:1-7 the picture is one of an unfruitful vine. Even though grace has been expended on behalf of the people, the result has been only inedible grapes. Nothing was left undone to guarantee a sound crop, as verse 4a declares: “What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it?” God had great expectations for his vineyard, building a watchtower for its protection and a wine vat to store the crop (v. 2). But when God looked for a crop all he found was bad fruit (lit. ‘stink-fruit’).⁴⁶ The Lord’s joy and sorrow over his people comes to climax in verse 7. Motyer describes it this way: “Fruitlessness does not merely violate the Lord’s formal intention, it contradicts his heart.”⁴⁷ The harvest of the stink-fruit would lead to the consequence of six woes described in the rest of the fifth chapter. Israel failed God in the role she was called to fulfill as a nation, i.e. to be a light to the Gentiles (Is. 49:6), bringing God’s salvation to the ends of the earth. Scripture points to the need for a faithful vine, one that is revealed as the “true vine” and whose father is the gardener (John 15:1).

Compared to the bad fruit of Isaiah chapter 5, Galatians 5:22-23 lists the fruit of the Spirit, the evidence of righteous and Christlike character in the lives of those who follow Jesus. This fruit is radically different than the stink-fruit of Isaiah chapter five. How is such fruit borne in the lives of Christians? Since Christians are like branches on a

⁴⁶ Motyer, 62.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

vine, according to Jesus' words in John 15, the branch must remain firmly attached to the stem of the vine, or it will wither and die, and cease to bear fruit. Jesus said,

Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned (vv. 4-6).

In order for a branch to grow there must be a connection to the source of life-giving sap from the vine. When a branch fails to stay attached to the source of life it withers up and dies.

The vine grower is aware of which branches need the pruning of dying wood in order to remain a healthy part of the vine. And he knows how to prune branches that remain so that they can bear even more fruit. Left to itself a vine will produce excessive and unproductive growth in its branches. Extensive pruning is essential for maximum fruitfulness. Thus in the second verse Jesus indicates that every branch that bears fruit is pruned so that it can be even more fruitful. Marcus Dods describes this pruning work which God does as a faithful gardener. "The branch is not left to nature. It is not allowed to run out in every direction, to waste its life in attaining size. Where it seems to be doing grandly and promising success, the knife of the vinedresser ruthlessly cuts down the flourish, and the fine appearance lies withering on the ground. But the vintage justifies the husbandman."⁴⁸

Suffering in the life of the Christian sometimes does the work of pruning. McGrath describes it as "cutting off spurious growths which might be of no value or

⁴⁸ Marcus Dods, *The Gospel of St. John, Vol 2*, The Expositors' Bible (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1891), 183-184.

stopping shoots which, were they to grow further, would weaken the vine.”⁴⁹ Pruning hurts, and when you prune a plant you can see the wound that the pruning inflicts on it. But good pruning is never arbitrary or pointless, much less vindictive in its intent. Pruning is an action designed to inflict the minimum of damage on the vine or plant while achieving the maximum enhancement of its potential. McGrath continues, “Those who suffer may well be those who bear the most effective witness and those who bear the most fruit in and through their Christian lives.”⁵⁰

Milne describes the pruning process as one of the secrets of effective mission for God’s people. In the clearing off of some branches and the cleaning up of others, the gardener is exposing those that are dead and encouraging fruitfulness among those that are living. In pruning God uses hard circumstances and trials. None of these appear pleasant at the time, but the result is the production of a harvest. Milne affirms that the idea of pain leading to production is thus one of the primary laws of spiritual growth. “It is commonplace both of horticulture and of Christian experience that the harder the pruning, the greater the fragrance and beauty which will later be released. Our heavenly Father is hungry for fruit from his vine, and in order to produce it will often in his pruning cut deeper than we should ever have chosen. At the harvest, however, both ‘the sower and the reaper may be glad together’!”⁵¹

In both the development of Christian character and in the progress of Christian mission, God acts on his people to increase their fruitfulness. Oftentimes this action

⁴⁹ Alister E. McGrath, *Suffering and God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 75.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Milne, *The Message of John*, 221.

takes place through the trials and afflictions that confront the lives of Christians. The pruning that suffering provokes is meant for the good of both the Christians themselves as well as the kingdom work to which they are called. In both, the aim is healthy growth toward productive life.

In summary, all three of these metaphors describe a negative process, the discipline of a child, the refining of ore, the pruning of the vine or plant. But all three evoke a positive result: the child's good, the ore's purity, the vine's fruitfulness. This is the nature of God's use of suffering in the life of believers.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE VALUE OF CHRISTIAN SUFFERING

In his captivating novel, *The Shack*, author William P. Young develops the story of an average Christian man who personally encounters God through horrendous tragedy and suffering in his life. Mackenzie Allen Philips, the main character, struggles with intense anger, guilt, and resentment after the kidnapping and murder of his youngest daughter. In a poignant conversation between Mack and God, the heavenly Father addresses Mack's concern over the role that suffering is playing in his life. Mack questions if God has designed his daughter's death as a way to get through to him. God's response reveals some intriguing theology. "Mack, just because I work incredible good out of unspeakable tragedies doesn't mean I orchestrate the tragedies. Don't ever assume that my using something means I caused it or I need it to accomplish my purposes. That will only lead you to false notions about me. Grace doesn't depend on suffering to exist, but where there is suffering you will find grace in many facets and colors."¹

This message from a popular novel makes theological sense but would likely not be warmly embraced by many of its readers. For the notion of useful suffering is not popular in western culture, including the evangelical church culture. A gospel that values suffering challenges the Western church's penchant for the health and wealth gospel. It has been easier for those of us who live in the West to embrace a remnant theology that

¹ William P. Young, *The Shack* (Newberry Park, CA: Windblown Media, 2007), 185.

ultimately distances itself from any danger of suffering and refinement. Peter Kreeft sees this as no surprise, since the fundamental dictum of nearly all modern psychology is that we need to love ourselves, accept ourselves, and feel good about ourselves.² With such a view of the self, suffering seems to have no role to play in healthy life and growth. Yet this is not the case in much of the rest of the world, especially in the southern hemisphere, where Christians are familiar with suffering and see value in the way God uses suffering in their lives. In the New Testament account it is clear that people who devoted their lives to Christ were greeted more often with suffering than with what we would call success. In Romans 8 Paul reminds us that we should not be surprised at suffering but rather embrace it as part of God's purification of the remnant community. Commentator Mark Doka summarizes this view:

God desires to refine his people through suffering, and this will mean living in 'detached attachment' to the surrounding culture – in other words, as Christ teaches, to be in the world and yet not of it. This will mean fully entering into community as Christ entered into his, something that brought God with us but ultimately meant God crucified. It will mean that as we face opposition and pain, we should reflect deeply on how God is refining us and look to the One who endured so much suffering on our behalf and through it 'learned obedience' (Heb. 5:8).³

Randy Becton identifies seven responses to suffering: (1) avoidance of it, (2) being paralyzed by it, (3) fighting back against it, (4) rational adjustment to it, (5) transforming it, (6) resignation to it, or (7) trusting God with it.⁴ It is particularly this last response that is the focus of the biblical response.

² Peter Kreeft, *Making Sense Out of Suffering* (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1986), 151.

³ Mark J. Boda, *Haggai, Zechariah* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 517.

⁴ Randy Becton, *Does God Care When We Suffer?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 52-53.

One question that arises is this: if suffering is useful, even necessary, for our sanctification, then should we seek suffering as a good? Or, as C.S. Lewis asks the question, “If suffering is good, ought it not to be pursued rather than avoided?”⁵ Lewis answered by saying that suffering is not good in itself. Gilkey reminds us that suffering, and its twin, evil, enter the human experience as aliens and anomalies, interlopers and spoilers, enemies to what God originally designed for man. He warns that if we seek suffering as a necessary component in our lives we are likely to develop an unhealthy attitude of resignation to it.⁶ Yet is suffering to be regarded as a virtue? R.C. Sproul looks back at church history and Christians who went out of their way to suffer. He warns against the heresy of Manichaeism, which focused on releasing the soul from the evils of the flesh. Based on that mistaken concept, religious acts of asceticism, including bizarre forms of self-flagellation, have been practiced in the church as accruing merit in the sight of God. Sproul warns that suffering for the sake of suffering has no particular virtue. “There is no reason to seek suffering. Nor is there anything wrong in trying to avoid it unless avoiding it purposely involves a betrayal of Christ.”⁷ Charles Ohlrich argues that suffering should never be accepted, even though he believes that good can come out of it. Suffering should not be venerated as good in and of itself. In our imitation of God we should hate suffering as an enemy, not welcome it as a

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962; reprint, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 98.

⁶ Langdon Gilkey, “The Christian Understanding of Suffering,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 5 (1985): 54.

⁷ R.C. Sproul, *Surprised by Suffering* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1989), 186.

friend. Since God works to fight suffering, we should do so as well, using every means at our disposal to combat suffering.⁸

Ohlrich warns against extremism when Christians discuss participation in the cross of Christ. He sees the tendency in mystical Christianity to seek pain and hardship as ways of attaining a deeper union with the suffering God as a completely unbiblical approach to discipleship. Instead of seeking suffering and pain, Christians are commanded to seek Jesus, and for Ohlrich, this means seeking love.⁹ Lewis agrees, finding the good in suffering not in the experience itself but in “submission to the will of God, and, as for the spectators, the compassion aroused and the acts of mercy to which it leads.”¹⁰

James Sellers reminds us that Jesus did not seek pain and neither should those who follow him. Jesus’ prayer as he faced the crucifixion was, “Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me” (Matt. 26:39). Nevertheless he did not seek his own will. Christians should have the same attitude as Christ, and if this leads to suffering, they should accept the suffering but not pursue it.¹¹ But there is no room in Christian discipleship for the stigmata such as St. Francis had when the wounds of Jesus’ crucifixion appeared in the saint’s body.

⁸ Charles Ohlrich, *The Suffering of God: Hope and Comfort for Those Who Hurt* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982), 112-113.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁰ Lewis, 98.

¹¹ James E. Sellers, *When Trouble Comes: A Christian View of Evil, Sin, and Suffering* (New York: Abingdon, 1960), 102-103.

There is no biblical mandate to pursue a medieval Catholic practice of seeking physical pain in order to share in the life of Jesus.¹²

Ann Jervis takes a stronger stand against the idea that suffering is necessary in sanctification, arguing that suffering is not an instrument in sanctification at all, except as part of the condition of being “in Christ.”¹³ She says, “The challenge to suffer is to be kept separate from the desire for sanctification. We cannot create our own holiness, even though we must labor in faith, love, and hope. Our lives of focus on God and others through faith, love, and hope will be pierced with affliction, but how that affliction shapes us into holy people is not under our control.”¹⁴ Jervis treats Paul’s words about suffering in 1 Thessalonians as a developing thesis in Paul’s mind as he tries to connect the Thessalonians’ suffering with their sanctification, even as he has done so in his own life. “Do believers suffer in order to be sanctified? Is suffering necessary in order for believers to grow in holiness? There are intimations rather than assertions in Paul’s words to the Thessalonians.”¹⁵

While Jervis sounds a strong word against pursuing suffering for sanctification’s sake, she does not, in the end, divorce the possibility of growth in Christ from the experience of suffering. She writes, “As suffering is the unavoidable companion of [God’s] grace, Paul appears to have thought of suffering as a necessary aspect of the current work of God...Paul

¹² Kenneth Doka and John D. Morgan, *Death and Spirituality: Death, Value and Meaning* (Amityville, NY: Baywood Publishing, 1993), 70-71.

¹³ L. Ann Jervis, *At the Heart of the Gospel: Suffering and the Earliest Christian Message* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 52.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 224.

regarded the suffering that attends belief in the gospel as anything but accidental – acceptance of the gospel is at the same time acceptance of suffering.”¹⁶ Suffering produces, in the view of Jarvis, deliverance through God’s grace, which is an important concept in the experience of Christian discipleship. Jarvis retreats a bit on her position when she claims that there are indications that suffering contributes to sanctification, although this suffering is neither an end in itself nor explicitly described as a means to a holy end. She sees that the relationship of suffering to sanctification is subtle and indirect. She also asserts that suffering will find the believer, as opposed to the believer seeking out suffering, and sees a definite relationship between suffering and sanctification, although never as under the control of the believer. Finally Jarvis seems to acquiesce when she writes, “Holiness and suffering go together, but it is unclear exactly how.”¹⁷ She seems to do an about-face when she comments, “Having faith and love and suffering are two sides of the same coin – together they create the currency of the life worthy of God.”¹⁸

Others take a different view, calling followers of Christ to embrace suffering as an experience of great value. Calvin’s claim is exemplary when he writes, “None will be a partaker of the life and the kingdom of Christ who has not previously shared in his sufferings and death.”¹⁹ Paul regards suffering as a calling in the Christian life. He teaches the

¹⁶ Ibid., 29.

¹⁷ Ibid., 26.

¹⁸ Ibid., 21.

¹⁹ Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentary on the Harmony of the Evangelists: Matthew, Mark and Luke*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 420.

Romans, “Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may share in his glory.”²⁰ He writes in Philippians 1:29: “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him.” And in Colossians 1:24 Paul writes of his own experience, “Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I will fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. Peter agrees when he writes, “To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.”²¹

Kierkegaard regards suffering as essential in our understanding of God’s call in our lives. “Through sharing in suffering, then, the divine purposes are uncovered, (one’s vocation) and the transcendence over suffering is achieved, both in one’s individual existence and in the social history of communities generally.”²² Froma Walsh approaches suffering from a counselor’s standpoint and argues that even when there seems to be no purpose to suffering, it can be useful in helping persons to reach spiritual health.²³ Josiah Royce sees the value of suffering in the spiritual triumphs that come through the endurance and overcoming of evil. He believes that being made perfect in suffering is a universal, absolutely necessary law of the higher spiritual life.²⁴ F.F. Bruce comments on Paul’s exhortation to the Thessalonian Christians by affirming that the persecution those Christians

²⁰ Rom. 8:17 (NIV).

²¹ 1 Pet. 2:21 (NIV).

²² Gilkey, 62.

²³ Froma Walsh, ed. *Spiritual Resources in Family Therapy* (New York: Guilford Press, 1999), 117.

²⁴ Josiah Royce, “What is Vital in Christianity?,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 2, no. 4 (Oct. 1909), 441.

were experiencing was essential for their being made fit for the kingdom of God.²⁵

Commenting on Hebrews 5:9, Guthrie argues that “It is through the path of suffering that perfection is achieved.”²⁶

Stott joins the chorus of those who see suffering as important in the process of sanctification when he writes, “We should not hesitate to say, then, that God intends suffering to be a ‘means of grace’. Many of his children can repeat the psalmist’s statements: ‘Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word’ (Psalm 119:67).”²⁷

Why does suffering play such an important role in sanctification? In one sense suffering is invaluable in helping believers to focus their attention on God. C.S. Lewis’ famous quote plays well here: “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to raise a deaf world.”²⁸ J.C. Ryle sees in suffering a useful provision to keep in check the ravages of sin and the devil among men’s souls. He views sickness and pain as a rough schoolmaster but a real friend to men’s souls. For such suffering, according to Ryle, helps to (1) remind men of death, (2) soften men’s hearts, (3) level and humble men, and (4) try men’s religion.²⁹

Stanley Hauerwas argues that the suffering experienced by the early Christians did not make them question their belief in God but rather confirmed their belief that they were

²⁵ F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 361.

²⁶ Donald Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 131.

²⁷ John R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1966), 317.

²⁸ Lewis, 81.

²⁹ John Charles Ryle, *Practical Religion: Being Plain Papers on the Daily Duties, Experience, Dangers, and Privileges of Professing Christians* (Cambridge: James Clark & Co., 1959), 238.

part of Christ's church through baptism into his death.³⁰ Similarly, Calvin argues that suffering does a unique and necessary work of making the Christian aware of incapacity, so that the Christian will not trust in himself but instead transfer that trust to God. It is only through suffering, Calvin suggests, that Christians will "have unquestioned certainty of [God's] promises" in such a way that true hope is strengthened.³¹ John Piper echoes this thought by writing, "God so values our wholehearted faith...that he will, graciously, take away everything else in the world that we might be tempted to rely on – even life itself. His aim is that we grow deeper and stronger in our confidence that he himself will be all we need."³² Piper repeats the idea when he writes, "God's first and great design in all our trouble is that we might let go of self-confidence."³³

Piper finds significant benefits in suffering as designed by God. He agrees that Christians should not seek suffering for themselves or for others. But he argues that suffering is generally presented in the Bible as necessary and God-ordained for those who would enter God's kingdom and pursue lives of godliness. Suffering may involve tragedy but never stops there. "It is also viewed as a means of growing deep with God and becoming strong in this life, and becoming something glorious in the life to come."³⁴ Piper points to the examples of Job and Paul, both of whom, when struck by Satan, felt the hand of God.

³⁰ Stanley Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences: God, Medicine, and the Problem of Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 84.

³¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press), 704.

³² John Piper, *Future Grace* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1995), 347.

³³ John Piper, *Brother, We Are Not Professionals* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2002), 141.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 223.

“Ultimately, their suffering was from the Lord, and they knew it.”³⁵ Even when Satan is involved as the cause of the Christians afflictions, God is in view as the more distant, primary or ultimate cause. While Satan’s design is the destruction of faith, God’s design is the care and cure of the soul. Piper continues, “Strange as it may seem, one of the primary purposes of being shaken by suffering is to make our faith more unshakable...When faith is threatened and tested and stretched to the breaking point, the result is a greater capacity to endure.”³⁶

In his book, *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis makes an astonishing statement regarding the value of suffering when he says “The natural sequel to pain is joy.”³⁷ A statement like this makes no sense apart from the belief that God uses suffering for greater good. Jervis recognizes this underlying belief in Paul’s encouragements to the church in Thessalonica. “It is this strange combination of suffering and joy that reveals that the Thessalonians, like Paul and his associates and like Christ before them, have received the word as it was meant to be received.”³⁸ Jervis understands that believer-specific suffering takes place in the arena of joy. Christians do not rejoice in sufferings themselves but in the beneficial results that sufferings bring. Believers are not masochists who enjoy the pain, or stoics who grit their teeth and endure it. Instead, they are granted in suffering the opportunity to experience joy through the outworking of God’s gracious, divine purposes. And they hope in the glory that sufferings produce, so much so that they can even rejoice in the sufferings themselves.

³⁵ Ibid., 138.

³⁶ Piper, *Future Grace*, 347.

³⁷ Lewis, 104.

³⁸ Jervis, 26-27.

It is in this connection between present sufferings and future glory that John Stott draws appealing conclusions. He argues that suffering is not just the way to glory, so that Christians can grin and bear the one in anticipation of the other. He keeps in mind Paul's command in Romans 5:3-5 to rejoice in suffering and identifies the element that connects suffering to joy to be the sufferings themselves. The rejoicing that is called for is strenuous, as the verb Paul uses indicates (*kauchometna* = exalt). Stott's conclusion: "Present suffering and future glory are both objects of a Christian's exultation."³⁹ The sufferings Paul refers to in Romans 5 are not simply sickness or pain or bereavement, but tribulation, the pressure of living in a godless world. Stott says that such suffering is always the pathway to glory since it is the same pathway trodden by Jesus. The path that Jesus took is to be the path of his followers. Paul says as much in Romans 8:17, "...if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory." Just as Christ's suffering and death were essential for his victory over sin and death, the same holds true for those who belong to him.

Chamblin ties present suffering to future glory in two ways. On the one hand, it is the hope of heaven's glory that enables Christians to persevere in trials of many kinds. On the other hand, the hope that enables Christians to endure is itself a product of suffering. Chamblin concludes, "To seek at all costs to avoid pain and to maintain comfort risks the dimming of our hope. Not only so: the realization of hope is itself the product of suffering."⁴⁰

³⁹ John Stott, *Men Made New: An Exposition of Romans 5-8* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1966), 14.

⁴⁰ J. Knox Chamblin, *Paul and the Self: Apostolic Teaching for Personal Wholeness* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 253.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION: “A STAGGERING ELECTION”

This thesis has argued that suffering is a vital and expected component of sanctification. Suffering is, like sin and death and evil, mysteriously within the purview of God’s design and will. For believers, suffering is central to the struggle of following Christ as Lord. To be incorporated into Christ is to be called into the “fellowship of his sufferings.”¹ As Chamblin comments, “For the people of God, the whole span of history between the advents of Jesus is marked by suffering – by trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword, and death (Rom. 8:18)”² Christians can find comfort in suffering because of the fact that God empathizes with us in our suffering. Because God suffered in Jesus’ dying, suffering does not put the Christian out of harmony with God. Instead, suffering becomes an occasion in which God can empathize with the experience of the Christian.³

Louis Evely made the profound comment that “Since the cross, the problem of pain is no longer something to debate, it is “a staggering election.”⁴ No one is free from pain,

¹ Phil. 3:10 (NIV).

² J. Knox Chamblin, *Paul and the Self: Apostolic Teaching for Personal Wholeness* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 169.

³ Kenneth Doka and John D. Morgan, *Death and Spirituality: Death, Value and Meaning* (Amityville, NY: Baywood Publishing, 1993), 72.

⁴ Louis Evely, *Suffering* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 23.

difficulty, failure, death. Sufferings and afflictions expose issues of the heart: attitudes, motives, and idols. They point out our need for repair in our relationships with God and with others. But there is an old proverb that says, “The same flame that melts the wax hardens the clay.” Pain and suffering can shape us to be more like Christ, but it can also make us hard if we are living only for the here and now. As Evely writes, “Sometimes we will be able to see the redemptive good our suffering generates, sometimes we will not, but from heaven’s vantage point we will see and we will rejoice. At present we may see only the pain, but in the end we will see only Jesus.”⁵ For Christians to be transformed by their sufferings they need to live in light of a different reality. As the Sonship training recommends, “Life in this world can be fully lived only in light of another. To understand life now, we need to know what things will be like in the end.”⁶

Suffering is not the end. It is not an end in itself. But suffering ties the believer to Christ, and it testifies to the watching world that the believer’s allegiance is to Christ. In God’s amazing economy, suffering shifts to become itself an aspect of the divine redemption as our afflictions are mitigated, transfigured, and finally transcended by the power of God’s grace. Elizabeth Elliot, whose first husband was killed by the Auca Indians in Peru and whose second husband died of cancer, understood this reality. She comments, “Because God wills me joy, I will trust him with my tragedies.”⁷

⁵ Charles Ohlrich, *The Suffering of God: Hope and Comfort for Those Who Hurt* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982), 111.

⁶ *Living in Light of the Gospel Story* (Jenkintown, PA: World Harvest Mission, 2004), 69.

⁷ Randy Bechton, *Does God Care When We Suffer?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 53.

Not every experience of suffering will necessarily lead us to an appreciation for these truths. Suffering and affliction, trials and persecutions, are hard, even when we understand that God uses them for our good. But they are necessary if we are serious about the business of taking up our crosses in order to follow Christ. John Calvin teaches that in understanding the role of sorrows and tribulations play in our sanctification, Christians “see a sufficient reason why they should lovingly kiss the cross rather than dread it.”⁸ May we see these reasons more clearly in the light of Christ!

⁸ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 63.

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