

THE SUPREMACY OF CHRIST, PART 14: THE PURPOSE OF SUFFERING

2 Corinthians 12:7-10; James 1:2-4, 12 (NASB)

David Bruce Linn, Pastor-Teacher

5 February 2012

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Some years ago I had the privilege of conducting the funeral service of a sister in the Lord who went to be with him at the age of forty-six after many years of physical suffering. I have obtained permission from the family to tell her story.

Charlotte Bodo was born and raised in Branchburg, New Jersey. She went to Keuka College in New York and completed studies for her RN. It was not long after that she began having odd symptoms and was diagnosed with hydrocephalus, commonly called "water on the brain." Doctors were astounded that she had been able to study, work, and perform hospital duties with this ailment. A serious surgery was done to correct the problem as much as possible. But this was only the start of an incredible list of physical ailments for an otherwise happy, healthy, spirited young woman.

When I met her years later, she was mostly apartment-bound in her wheelchair. She had so many things wrong with her that she required about forty medications which she kept in a large fishing tackle box to keep them organized. She was, by then, diabetic. She had arthritis, fibromyalgia, asthma, and esophageal reflux. She had migraines and vertigo. Doctors were divided on whether she was officially epileptic, but she needed medication to prevent seizures. Charlotte had so much constant pain that even the highest doses of painkillers could only mute it.

Her bones had begun breaking down by then, so she required leg braces to do even a limited amount of walking. Steel pins placed in her joints to hold them together came loose and moved around, causing intense pain. Her teeth became soft and all had to be removed. It took over a year to fit her with dentures. Because of her many hospital stays, she picked up drug-resistant infections which had little hope for cure. She had perpetual financial difficulties because she could not work.

As her decline progressed, she had bouts of extreme weakness for long periods of time, and could not successfully get up to go to the bathroom without falling several times a day. Her aides would end up calling the EMT's repeatedly to get her back into her hospital bed. As you might expect, the accumulation of all these things resulted in a wicked clinical depression. Medical personnel found her case perplexing because of the complex interaction of ailments and the medications needed for them. In the end she was taken by ambulance to the emergency department with a blood pressure and chemistry not normally compatible with life. After a combined consult with four physicians they concluded that she was dying, and not from any of the previously diagnosed illnesses. Her aorta was simply splitting apart and leaking blood.

There is actually much more to the story, but you can see by the part I have told you that intelligent, articulate Charlotte spent most of her adult life suffering for no reason that she could determine. She told everyone she met about her faith in Christ to the very end. There were untold numbers of times when she wished she could die and was angry with God for not taking her home. When I prayed with her just a few hours before she died, she kept repeating in a low voice: "I can't understand why this is happening..." She had faithfully nursed herself throughout, and kept crying out

for answers from God all the way. She trusted him through it all--even while wrestling with him like Jacob at the Jabbok River.

Very few of us will have to face such an overwhelming, soul-killing array of sufferings. Yet suffering comes to us all, and even the lucky will face death eventually. Does suffering have any purpose in God's plan? If he is loving and all-powerful, why does he not simply take it all away?

When I delivered the funeral sermon for Charlotte Bodo I used her own Bible. Though she was not one to mark up her Bible much, certain passages were underlined or highlighted in green. Most of them related to her question: "Why is this happening?" And while we may not find ourselves completely satisfied with the answers God provides in the Bible, he has some very clear purposes for human suffering. While the Lord does not directly send these sufferings, as we shall see, he nevertheless is mobilized to use them in our lives for our ultimate blessing and the advancement of his kingdom.

TO KEEP US FROM BEING INSUFFERABLE

The first answer to Charlotte's question is from the apostle Paul as he was writing to Christian brothers and sisters in Corinth. He had been accused by false apostles there of elevating himself. To refute this attack and purely for the spiritual health of the Corinthian believers he told a personal story of having been given a view of the third heaven--the dwelling place of God. Paul had not told anyone about this for fourteen years, but to convince them of his sincerity in Christ and to keep them from following the false apostles he finally revealed this direct revelation of God which was conferred upon him alone. That would be a valid reason to boast!

Amazingly, he told this story not to boast, but as the set up for an explanation of a very important reason God permits trials or sufferings in our lives. He wrote: **"Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me-- to keep me from exalting myself!"** (2 Corinthians 12:7). He said, in effect, that God lifted one finger of protection to allow a demonic spirit to drive some exquisite pain into his life to keep him from becoming insufferable. He could have been conceited about his trip to heaven, but in order to keep him useful to the kingdom God stuck a thorn in Paul which he could not remove.

What would have been so poisonous about Paul exalting himself a little bit? God is the One who is exalted. Christ is the preeminent One, the supreme One. Any false exaltation of a human being is a dilution of honor to God. It is also poison to the soul, because the master sin of our first mother and father, Adam and Eve, was a vaunting of self as revealed by a refusal to obey their Maker. And as the commentator R.C.H. Lenski argued, let us not lose the demonic element. The Lord lifted one part of Paul's protection to permit a demonic power to give him the most intense pain. The Devil always means by such acts to pry us away from our faith, and the Lord always means them to test our faith to strengthen it.

Any vaunting of the human self is an attack upon the supremacy of Christ which he will not tolerate in his children. The first purpose of suffering, then, is to keep us from becoming insufferable and thereby dishonor God. When was the last time you thought: "I wonder if this use of my mouth or

this behavior honors or dishonors the God who saved me?"

TO TEACH US THAT GOD'S GRACE CAN GET US THROUGH ANYTHING

In the very next verses Paul reveals another profound purpose for sufferings: "**Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.' Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me**" (2 Corinthians 12:8-9). There are times when the Lord deems us in need of a specific set of words to encourage and guide us. Paul quotes the Lord here exactly. He no doubt recounted those words to himself over and over.

God had a greater lesson for Paul to learn than "God can take away my pain if I pray." This is important, but of vastly more significance is the truth that God's grace can get us through anything. All of us have limits on what we think we are willing to endure for the Lord, and God wants to show us that his grace and power are limitless. There is no suffering so severe that he cannot see us through it. I always pray for direct deliverance, as Paul did, and you should, too. I never give up that prayer unless God himself tells me he has another plan. He told Paul that three requests for deliverance was enough. God's greater plan for every one of us is to learn that his grace will support us through every form of suffering, no matter how hard.

TO ACTIVATE THE POWER OF CHRIST WITHIN US

But Paul reveals that this lesson went beyond that to the very nature of the life of faith for him. Grace and power are bound together in the Lord's ministry to us. This may be the key dynamic of the ministry of the apostle Paul which was filled with healings, signs, wonders, and evangelistic success. When he was weak then God was strong within him.

If so, what do you think God would be willing to do to teach us that same dynamic? Would he lift his finger of protection and permit a messenger of Satan to drive a thorn into our flesh? How badly do you think he wants us to learn to humble ourselves, trust our own strength not at all, and learn to fly on the wings of divine power? I think he wants that for us very badly! And because Christ our Lord is supreme, he can arrange learning experiences for us just as he did for Paul, who wrote: "**Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong**" (2 Corinthians 12:10).

Because of this reality of divine power, a woman in a wheelchair may express more of the power of God than a well person! A child may release more than adult, a new Christian more than a mature Christian. It all hinges on the acceptance, after prayer, of the position of suffering as an opportunity to activate the power of Christ which dwells in every believer. You will notice that when all the many arguments for the identification of Paul's "thorn in the flesh" are over, Paul has widened the principle of divine strength through our weakness to every kind of difficulty: "**weaknesses ...insults ...distresses ...persecutions [and] difficulties**" (conflated).

Have you ever prayed: "Lord, I really wish I could see more of your power in my life?" Then learn the principle of humility, that human power shuts off divine power, and the weak and needy find themselves instruments of Almighty God if they are willing to trust totally to him.

TO TEACH US THE VIRTUES OF PATIENCE AND PERSEVERANCE

We turn now to James, the brother of Jesus and head elder of the mother church in Jerusalem, for our fourth purpose of suffering: "**Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance**" (James 1:2-3). The term "endurance" is also translated as steadfastness, patience, and perseverance. We immediately see that James was as far off his rocker as Paul. Paul says he would boast about his weaknesses, and was content with sufferings of all kinds. Now James tells us to rejoice in trials and sufferings! Perhaps that is why some people who are unacquainted with true faith in Christ think that Christians are a bunch of masochists.

But there are many modern analogies to this teaching of James that suffering develops in us the virtues of patience and perseverance. We all know that people who win marathons have done so through tremendous pain and by brutal self-discipline in their training. No Olympic athlete succeeds by saying: "I feel yucky today. I think I'll skip training and play video games instead." No one gains a doctoral degree without a long period of painful striving. No one sews a perfect dress, keeps a beautiful garden, or does anything of real value without taxing effort. So why should we be surprised when the Lord tells us that the sufferings of life are golden opportunities to develop the spiritual virtue of endurance?

Of course the flesh hates the pain! But the spiritual nature can rejoice even as the body screams. There is no need to invite suffering, as some Christians have done. The sovereign God allows us to live in a ruined world full of sickness and sin. We'll all have abundant opportunities to learn patience.

TO BE A TOOL IN GOD'S HAND TO MATURE US

A fifth purpose for suffering we learn from James is that it becomes a tool in God's hand to mature us in every way in Christ. He went on in the next verse to write: "**And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing**" (James 1:4). You can see that there is a sequence which begins with suffering. If we work with God to develop patient endurance through suffering he will use that tool to refine us into mature people who honor Christ with everything in our lives. That is what it means to make us "perfect and complete." It is not the idea of sinless perfection, but full maturity in Christ.

I have known believers who have largely refused this process. They trust Christ for salvation but are not at all interested in the painful process of coming to maturity in Christ. What you observe is that even after decades in the church they still act like babies, demanding what they want and avoiding difficult ministries. The writer to the Hebrews explained: "**Concerning [the deep things of Christ] we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food**" (Hebrews 5:11-12). This was a rebuke directed to people who had only a few years in the Lord, but they were expected to have matured by then.

That means that if we count our sufferings as joy and let the Lord use them to teach us endurance

and maturity in Christ we can be mature in just a few years. There is no substitute process of maturation which escapes the pain. If we refuse the process, God will be trying to speak to us but we will become "dull of hearing." Listen carefully to the logic: we will still have the suffering, but it will be for nothing!

TO LEAD US THROUGH ENDURANCE TO THE CROWN OF LIFE

Finally, James reveals in verse twelve of this chapter that suffering, as God uses it to teach us, leads us to the blessed reality of the eternal life principle: "**Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him**" (James 1:12). There is no crown of eternal life for those who do not endure by holding on to their faith. The trials and temptations of this life line the path everyone must walk, and the Lord leads us down this path to life in him by faith.

You can see that love and faith are always bonded together in the believer. The one who perseveres does so by faith, and because he or she loves the Lord. Suffering tests them both. The reward at the end of the testing is the sweetest thing which a human being can experience, namely, the eternal life which is defined as the very knowledge of God.

Many seek their ultimate experience in some other way. The bungee-jumpers and the Prada-wearers, the Ferrari drivers and the crack users, the sex addicts and the gamblers, the sports fiends and fine cigar smokers cannot get anywhere near the pure, undiluted joy of knowing God, no matter how hard they try through those means. It only comes to those who trust the Lord, patiently endure suffering by faith, grow in maturity through them, and hang on to the end to receive the crown of life.

Charlotte Bodo, through many more sufferings than most of us will have to face in life, endured to the end. There were times of deep discouragement and darkness where she could barely lift her head. There were times of screaming frustration. There were times when the pain medication had to be so high that she would nod off with her eyes half open in the middle of a sentence. She never stopped trusting the Lord, never stopped sharing her faith, and never stopped trying to think of things to do for others with her very limited resources. She now has personal knowledge that the end of the journey of this life is just the beginning of the journey of the next.

This is the conclusion of all: By the will of a sovereign God we wade through the muck, wreckage, and pain of this ruined world every day. Suffering is a universal reality. The offer we are made by virtue of the supremacy of Christ is the ability to see the grace and strength of God grow within us by faith and love. Because he is supreme, nothing can stop Christ from fulfilling this promise to us. This is the high purpose of God for us in the course of suffering.

If you have not yet asked Christ to forgive your sin and give you eternal life you are still facing the sufferings of this life on your own. I would not want to be in your position. Let this be the time to stop going it alone. There is a huge, divine hand of help reaching down from heaven to you. I advise you to take it.