

The Road from Suffering to Glory (Part 1) - by Rev. Tom Aicken

The Bible tells us quite a bit about suffering in this world, and it's unreasonable that we who know the Lord should expect to escape it. It's through suffering, after all, that Jesus learned obedience (Heb.5:8). Why, then, shouldn't we? In fact, suffering is an essential part of life in a fallen world. "Man is born to trouble, as the sparks fly upward" (Job. 5:7). Such suffering is not a freak thing, or mysterious anomaly, but belongs to the natural order.

Moreover, this suffering comes not from the devil, as we may too easily think, but from God Himself (Is. 45:7), and, for the believer, there is a good side to all such adversity and affliction. The Lord is with His people all the time, but there is a particular joy and peace and comfort to discovering what a very present help He is in the midst of one's affliction.

People tend to think of any kind of suffering, not as a consequence of evil, but as something evil in itself, and thus as something from which no good or useful thing could ever come. They ask, "Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people?" But the question they should ask (and would ask if only they knew their own heart) is, "How can a holy God allow good things to happen to any of Adam's fallen race?" This is what gets us thinking and enables us to learn that, yes, there is a point and purpose to suffering.

There are those who suffer because of righteousness (Lk. 21:17). There are those who suffer because of unrighteousness, such as convicted criminals who are incarcerated for their vile deeds, and other irresponsible people who live a careless, over-indulgent lifestyle. There are others, though, who suffer, not for anything that they or their parents have done, but simply because they live in a fallen world, and because, as I say, none of us can expect to escape the troubles that we find here. What's more, it's not only sinners who suffer, but the whole created order is subject to frustration, is in bondage to decay, and is groaning to be liberated from the plague of man's fall into sin (see Rom. 8).

Suffering has posed great problems for man ever since the first thorns grew up in Adam's garden, ever since he had to work by the sweat of his brow (and often with poor results) in order to get food up from the ground. More than the ill-health, however, more than the physical exhaustion and the frustration that comes of it, suffering is often marked by a lot of unanswered questions, such as 'Why me, Lord?, Why this?, Why now?' In our suffering we're not always well equipped to answer those questions, and that's when we become particularly vulnerable to Satan's devices.

One argument the devil often puts to Christians in the midst of their grief is, "Do you really think that you are a child of God? Doesn't all your suffering prove conclusively that you are not one of His, and that He cares nothing for you?" That's a difficult

argument to counter, especially when our circumstances at that moment seem, at least superficially, to substantiate it. For a time, because of his weakened state, the believer may give in to that. At first, he doubts his salvation. And then, at the next stage, he resigns himself to the notion that God couldn't possibly love him. And finally, having lost the joy of his salvation, what does he do? He wallows in the mire of self-pity, and, without even knowing it, he makes himself vulnerable to even more of Satan's devices!

Romans 8 warns us against thinking that our suffering must mean that God doesn't love us, and it even equips us, as Christians, with the arguments we need to guard ourselves against those vicious attacks. Our suffering is designed, not to drive us from the Lord, but to draw us closer to Him, to make us partakers of His holiness, and so prepare us for glory. Vv. 17-27 show us how God works suffering in the best interest of His people; vv. 28-39 show us how He works all things together for their good (not only suffering, but everything else as well), and that He has done that from all eternity.

In the first part, vv. 17-27, if we suffer for Christ, beloved, we identify with Him (v. 17). As we think about it, doesn't that give our pain and sorrow a lot of dignity? And doesn't it help us at the same time to remember that our Lord doesn't call us to endure anything for Him that He hasn't also endured (and so much more!) for us? More than that, as difficult as our suffering may sometimes be right now, dear Christian, it doesn't compare to the glory which is yet to come (v.18). In fact, our present troubles, if we endure them faithfully, actually contribute to that glory (see 2 Cor. 4:17).

In the midst of our suffering, God gives His people hope (vv. 19-26). It's a hope that comes of our having the Holy Spirit, the Spirit who bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God after all. The Holy Spirit helps us in our weaknesses, intercedes for us with groans which words cannot express, and suddenly we find ourselves able to pray in our distress as never before.

When we pray like that, though we do so in sorrow and agony, God the Father hears these Spirit-filled prayers and He delights to answer them (v. 27). He may not give us precisely what we ask, or even when we ask it, but He doesn't need to be persuaded to help us (see John 16:26,27), and no good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly (Ps. 84:11).

Isn't it good to know these things, believer, and to think them through again every time that God appoints us to suffer? All three Persons of the Godhead - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - are working in our best interest even in our suffering. What a different account that is from the false narrative of the devil who doesn't want us to know or ever consider the true facts of what we're called to endure!

In the second part, vv. 28-39, here we move right away from the subject of suffering to see that God is at work in everything that happens, and always has been, working all things together for good to those whom He has loved in Christ from before the foundation of the world. To summarize, if God is so for us, believer, no one in all creation, not even the devil, can thwart His eternal plan, can disrupt His gracious purpose for us, or can snatch us away from His love to us in Christ! This, then, is something much bigger than just trying to get some kind of handle on what our suffering is about.

There are three things which stand out here in this last part of the chapter: (1) We see the Lord, not as some local deity with limited powers, but as the God of the universe. He created everything there is, and did so out of nothing. What's more, He continues to uphold everything, to govern all the affairs of men and angels, and to direct it all to its intended purpose.

(2) We see the Lord here, not only as the all-powerful God of the universe, but as the God of His people in particular, our Redeemer, Defender and Friend. He has a people whom He is calling out of the world, His own prized possession, the apple of His eye. Everything in all creation exists for their benefit and is controlled for their good.

(3) We see, finally, that the Lord is He in Whom we may have complete confidence. He's able to look after us, on the one hand, because He's almighty God; and He will look after us, on the other hand, beloved - indeed, He wants to do so - because (in Christ Jesus, and for His sake) He's our loving Father, too (see Matt. 7:9-11).

Are you sometimes plagued with troubles, believer, bigger troubles than you can handle, troubles which seem to have no purpose, and (worst of all) troubles from which you find no relief? Look again at this view of who God is and what He's like in Romans 8, and see how He works all things together for good for His people, for all who love Him. Know that your circumstances, which may at times appear to be against you, have to be viewed in the light of God's glorious plan and eternal purpose for you. Will Satan continue to lie to you? Of course he will, but you don't have to believe him. He was the father of lies from the beginning (Jn. 8:44). "Wait on the Lord," as the psalmist tells us, "be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart; wait, I say, on the Lord!" (Ps. 27:14.)