

# Hopeful Suffering

By Todd Pruitt

“Many are the afflictions of the righteous.” So says the Psalmist in Psalm 34:19. Jesus confirms this truth when He told his followers, “In the world you will have trouble” (Jn. 16:34). Scripture does not paint an easy picture for us. Everyone suffers. But God’s people are promised an extra measure of suffering that will never befall the world. Following Jesus invites its own category of suffering. Jesus sends His disciples into the world “as sheep in the midst of wolves” (Matt 10:16). Does anyone question what happens to sheep among wolves? Paul confirmed to Timothy, “Indeed all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and imposters will go on from bad to worse...” (II Tim 3:12-13a). The wicked will often times prosper in this world while God’s children are often the objects of derision and hostility.

What hope do we have when we suffer? What is unshakably true about God and suffering that will keep us from ultimate despair in the loss of a child, natural disasters, and devastating diagnoses?

I find in Scripture two main sources of hope in the midst of sufferings. The first is that **our sufferings are not accidental but by God’s design**. Scripture makes plain that our sufferings are not random accidents or mere by-products of the fall. Paul exhorted the Thessalonian believers “that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that *we are destined for this*” (I Thess 3:3). Our suffering, like all human events takes place under the direction of God “who works all things according to the counsel of His will” (Eph 1:11). This is intended for our comfort. How hopeless we would be if our suffering was guided by forces such as fate or chance or man’s will. Some, however, have found comfort in believing that God is not sovereign in our sufferings. It is to say that we can believe in the goodness of God so long as we reject the sovereignty of God in calamity. These explanations serve to tie God up in a tidy bow of our own man-centered philosophy. In the end, we strip our Maker of His good and gracious sovereignty. Remember Paul’s words to the Philippians: “For *it has been granted to you* that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake” (Phil 1:29). Not only is our belief in Christ a gift of God’s sovereign grace but so to are our sufferings for Christ.

Oh, for more people who are able to say with Job, “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21). Although Satan was the means by which Job suffered loss, he understood that God was providentially guiding the events. This was Joseph’s hope in the face of sin and injustice when he declared to his conniving brothers, “So *it was not you who sent me here*, but God...As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good...” (Gen 45:8; 50:20). In all of this, Joseph’s brothers were still responsible for their sin for they did just as their sinful wills pleased. However, God is never

at the mercy of human will. God is pleased to use whatever means He chooses to accomplish His good and perfect will. "Our God is in the heavens; he does all that He pleases" (Ps 115:3).

We see God's sovereignty in suffering displayed most gloriously in the crucifixion of His Son. Jesus was sent for the purpose of dying. And yet His death required that men do what was sinful by crucifying the world's only innocent Man. Does this make Jesus' tormentors less responsible for what they did? Absolutely not! They did just as their sinful hearts desired. But God was at work. When holy Jesus died in the place of unworthy sinners He glorified God by fulfilling His will to purchase worshipers from every language, tribe, people, and nation (Rev 5:9).

The second reason for hope in suffering is that **whatever we suffer in this lifetime will be eclipsed by one glimpse of the glory to come.** "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom 8:18). That glory, Paul goes on to explain, is the glory of God's great work of redemption which will be completely realized when all that was ruined in the fall is finally made right.

So if you are suffering today just wait a little while longer, Christian. For a little longer bear up under the groaning of creation. The day is not long until God will welcome you into the glory of His presence. You have had but a short lifetime to taste the bitter fruit of this sinful world. You will have eternity to drink deeply from the pleasures that flow from God's mighty right hand. I cannot explain it. Who on earth can? But one glimpse of God in glory will make you forget in an instant all you suffered in this life. Is this just pie-in-the-sky? O, it is far better than pie. It is Eden restored. It is paradise regained. So press on suffering Christian. It has been granted to you to suffer for Christ. In this lifetime the Lord gives and takes away. In the next lifetime, God will take away only tears and loss and calamity. It will be a world better than human words can describe. Until then, suffer hopefully knowing that it will last only for the night, and then joy.