

# September 2000: Suffering

by Aaron Greenway

This is not an issue that many like to talk about, because no one likes pain. No one likes to hurt. It is human to try and avoid it at all costs. If we have back problems, we get operated on. If we have a cold, we take medicine. If our shoes are too tight, we get new ones. If we have a broken heart, we console ourselves with chocolate!

No one prefers to go through a cancer diagnosis or undergo financial bankruptcy, but part of the process of living the Christian life is going through the hard times. In fact, the Apostle Paul never divorced salvation from suffering (Phil 1:29), as if it was a natural part of being a Christian. Perhaps, in America, this is why we are shocked when people like Cassie Bernall stand up for their faith while looking down the barrel of a gun. This jolts us in this country because we are not used to being persecuted for our faith, at least not in the way Christians around the world suffer, and certainly not like the Saints of Old did (Hebrews 11:35–38). We almost take suffering to be abnormal, like there is something wrong with us if we suffer. We take that to mean that we are lacking in faith if we are being attacked by the devil.

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Trust me, if our faith is in Jesus Christ and we are actively pursuing Him, we have just become a target. “All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” (2 Timothy 3:12). Jesus said, “Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecute Me, they will also persecute You” (John 15:20). The hard-core reality is that we are going to suffer assault from the forces of Satan and the world if we are hard-core for Jesus. Bluntly, if we start talking about Jesus to others, Satan is going to do his best to try and shut us up!

But what benefit is there to suffering? I mean, after all, why can't God totally leave that component out of our lives. Suffering is not cool! Couldn't I live a greater Christian life if I

weren't bogged down by difficulties. Responding to this mentality, Peter had a few things to say: "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (I Peter 1:6-7).

The best view of suffering that we have is Jesus Himself. God foreordained for Jesus to suffer because there was something greater to be accomplished. Could we then say that when we suffer, that God has something cooking beneath the surface? God's purpose in us is to conform us to the image of His Son, to make us like Jesus Christ. However, the tendency is to sulk or to blame God when we suffer because we do not see the bigger picture. Our finiteness limits our scope.

James says, "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith works patience" (James 1:2-3). James had a different perspective on the issue, telling Christians to rejoice when they were persecuted. Jesus said the same thing. How insane is that?!...unless God has something bigger and better in mind. God seems to delight in shining the light out of the darkness (2 Corinthians 4:6). He seems to enjoy turning good out of evil. Why is this? By allowing the devil to work his schemes, God is able to turn a situation around and get the glory. No one will ever notice a light unless there is first darkness.

Further, going through pain and suffering drives us to the end of ourselves. It forces us to die to our own will and our resources until the only thing we have left is Jesus. We can no longer depend on our slickness, our good looks, our money, our fame, and our ingenuity to get us through our troubles. We need the hand and the power of God to work mightily in our lives. And quite frankly, that is just the way God likes it! Suffering is a reminder to us that our self-sufficiency is nothing more than one step closer to our undoing — spiritually.

The comfort in all of this is knowing that we can run to the healer. We know that we can go to God for comfort, for shelter, and for encouragement. God understands suffering, because He went through it Himself when He died on the cross. If anyone understands, He does.

So, let us rejoice when we suffer. Chances are, we are on the right track. If we are in pain, let us thank God, because nothing falls outside of His sovereign will. Does this mean we feel like being thankful? Certainly not, and we certainly can ask God to remove the circumstances. Also, we can go to the Savior who bore our pain. That is part of the beauty of the cross — the place we can run for healing.