



e-devotional

A devotional on the spiritual formation of Christian workers in the Central Pacific District of the Christian & Missionary Alliance

April 2006

Mandatory Disciplines: The Discipline of Suffering

Scripture: Philippians 1:29; James 1:2-4

Task: Acknowledge suffering is indigenous to Christian experience, then evaluate and process hurts, disappointments and wrongful treatment through the grid of acceptance of life-events from a loving and sovereign Father and the cleansing and restorative power of forgiveness.

Author John Burdon Sanderson Haldane transparently said: "I have come to the conclusion that my subjective account of my motivation is largely mythical on almost all occasions. I don't know why I do things." I think this is very clearly the case in most of our response to adversity or suffering. When we hurt, no one has been through what we've been through; our situation is different from everyone else's; our pain is more severe.

Paul wrote to a suffering church in Philippi: "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer (*paschō*: apparently a primary verb [the third form used only in certain tenses for it]; to *experience* a sensation or impression [usually painful]:—feel, passion, suffer, vex) for him" (Philippians 1:29). He also reminded the Corinthian Christian that "no temptation (*peirazō*: a putting to *proof* [by experiment (of good), *experience* (of evil), solicitation, discipline or provocation]; by implication *adversity* testing/trial) has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it" (1 Corinthians 1:13). Interestingly, I made this a life verse when I was in the eighth grade. Imagine the deep trials I was going through as a young teen! Nonetheless, it was real to me then and has been all through my seven decades of experience.

The Christ-Life Requires Suffering (Philippians 1:29-30)

Granted refers to a gracious gift. The gift is ours on behalf of Christ; *i.e.*, it is part of the Christian's experience.

The gift is in two parts. The one is to believe on Christ. The other is to suffer for Christ. We fail to talk much about suffering, but it was part and parcel of the gospel in apostolic days. At Paul's own conversion, the Lord told him of the suffering that was to come to him. When Paul and Barnabas paid a return visit to the churches in Asia Minor, they strengthened and encouraged the new believers saying: "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). He wrote the Thessalonian church reminding them, "In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know" (1 Thessalonians 3:4).

Verse 30 refers to the "struggle" Paul experienced. It was used of the agony an athlete goes through in training to become a champion. Christianity is not for

pamper-wearers. It is for people who will stay with Christ through the agony of rejection, misunderstanding, and hurt.

The magazine of Bible Literature International, *The Quiet Miracle* (1986), had an article on Rose Warmer. Rose was born into a Hungarian Jewish family in 1909 and grew up in war conditions. She learned the abuse one received as a Jew. While young, she read many books on religion and philosophy, developed her athletic skills, and became a dancer and sculptor. Her deep hunger for meaning caused her to read the Bible, though she did not understand it. When thirty she heard a sermon on Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, which led to her trust in him as her Savior.

That was 1939. As a church member, she was not arrested with other Jews. While watching her people being taken away, she decided to identify fully with them.

It was a terrible scene, and I watched...so burdened for them all I could hardly breathe. Then a shock went through my body. I recognized some of the villagers.... Some of them were my friends. I longed to be with them. If they were to be starved, I wanted to starve. If they were being taken over the border to be killed, I wanted to be killed with them. I felt I belonged to them.... I was their teacher. I was the only one who could bring them the Word of God in their anguish.

In the concentration camp at Auschwitz, rather than receiving her witness of Jesus as Messiah and Savior, most rejected her. They viewed a Christian convert with the same contempt as a Nazi. Other prisoners suffered together, Rose was alone. "I prayed constantly that the Lord would help me endure."

She did not turn from her people after the war. She immigrated to Israel in 1950. For 27 years she worked tirelessly to introduce her people to the "New Testament of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ." Traveling by motor scooter and later by automobile, Rose delivered Bibles to libraries, kibbutzim, and schools. Because of her faithful work, many came to trust Jesus as their Messiah and Savior. She died in 1986.

Paul stated in verse 20: "I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ."

Christ is the Christian's life-giving environment and purpose. The Christ-life exalts Jesus, it brings fruitfulness in other's lives, and it includes suffering. If you are suffering because of Christ, understand that's part of the gift of grace. Don't run scared. Don't run alone. Take your place in the church. God will, through the help given by the Spirit and the prayers of the church, turn your adversity into something that glorifies Christ.

James explored the same vein of gold in 1:2-4: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials [same word in 1 Cor. 10:13] of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."

Trials Are Inevitable

It is not "if" we face trials, but "whenever" we face them. It is not a question of if, nor even of why we have trials, but how are we going to face them. You probably won't be sold into slavery by your family, nor suffer the horrors of Job. But everyone has trials. How are you going to face them? Our culture has concluded that we do not

deserve that kind of experience. We have the right to a life free of suffering and filled with pleasure. A psychologist stated on the CBS evening news a few years ago that the message of our drug-oriented society is: "Don't deal with your problems. Drugs is one way for them to go away." Of course they don't go away; they become compounded by drug indulgence.

Trials Come in a Variety of Forms

The word is 'variegated', like different colored polka dots on a screen. Kids have parents and parents have kids. Husbands have habits, temperaments, peculiarities that conflict with their wife's and there are wives with the same. Employees have employers; neighbors have dogs that bark, or keep messy yards, or have parties late at night outdoors, or play loud music; we lose our jobs, or we spend more than we make, or we get the short end of the stick at work.

In marriage, financial problems hit us usually because we want more than we can afford to have. Then there are in-laws, kids, the special problems of blended families, car troubles, the loss of a job, neighbor issues.

Trials Are to Be Welcomed with Pure Joy

"Consider" comes from a word that means to lead or to command with an official authority. When we are hit broadside by the blasts of adversity, we are to command ourselves to look at that trial with pure joy. With greater accuracy, the KJV reads, "all joy." The word is radically inclusive of everything, meaning the highest degree or maximum. We are to respond to the many different trials that place stress and difficulty in our lives with maximum joy—a word meaning delight. We do not praise God that we hurt; that is lunacy.

Pure joy is to express praise to God. On what basis, we ask? We praise him that he is in control. We praise him that he is with us to feel with us our pain, remembering the full range of trials he went through in love for us. We praise him that whatever loneliness or hatred we feel, his love for us is unshakable. We praise him that regardless of how deep the pain is, it will only be temporary. He has prepared for us a permanent home that is free of all forms of trial and suffering.

Paul knew trials in greater depth than any of us. He wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:8:

"We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed [pressure and stress]; perplexed, but not in despair [at wit's end, no answers]; persecuted, but not abandoned [the world's backlash against our morality and stand]; struck down, but not destroyed [death, calamity, or catastrophe]".

Trials Are a Testing of Our Faith

The word for 'test' (*dokimion*) is of faith that has been put to the test and approved. It was used of the successful testing of precious metals and coins (*Expositors*, 171).

Genesis 22 states that God tested Abraham when he told him to take his only son Isaac, the son of promise and kill him as a sacrifice on Mt. Moriah. That not only displayed the strength of Abraham, it strengthened him. The trials that come to us are designed of God to strengthen us, not to cause us to break. The verse before the litany of the troubles of Paul reads (2 Cor. 4:7): "We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."

Trials Produce Perseverance in the Believer

Perseverance is to stand with our face to the wind. It is one of the most important qualities of Christ-likeness that we can develop. It is not a gift. It is a character trait. If there is not wind we can't stand with our face to it.

The natural response to trials that nail us in sneak attacks that we think we do not deserve is bitterness. That is a result of the sinful nature. The world outside of Christ does that. They curse and swear and shake their fists at God. This Christian is not to do so. But do you? Are you bitter toward you mom or dad, your boss, a coach or teacher, a cop who mistreated you, a wife or husband who betrayed you? Bitterness will destroy a person. It will rot your soul like hydrochloric acid will eat away the flesh on which it falls.

Perseverance Makes the Believer Mature and Complete

James uses two words to describe the results of perseverance, the response of joy and praise to trials. First, we become mature. The word, *teleios*, means to be complete or perfect in the sense of wholeness, being without blemish. God uses trials to cleanse us of sin. God used a fight with my dad to rid me of an explosive temper in which I lost complete control. Trials make us mature in Christ-like character if we let perseverance do its full job. If we short-circuit that process, then we abort God's work in us. That's why sometimes we are not healed, why we don't get a job right away, why the stress factors are not eliminated. God is more concerned with our becoming like his Son than he is our being without pain.

The second word, "complete," means to possess all the parts. So in combination with the first, it places the emphasis of *teleios* on maturity. God wants us to be complete people. There are a lot of people badly distorted, out of balance in their lives. God wants wholeness in his children.

In August of '82, Brother Cheng was arrested in China for the "anti-revolutionary activity" of preaching the Gospel. He was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment in 1984, after spending two years in detention.

Brother Cheng took a piece of toilet paper and wrote a letter to his family encouraging them to be strong and persevere. It is a summary of biblical teaching on suffering:

Suffering often brings joy;
Daniel was tried by the den of lions and the furnace.
Since days of old there has been order in suffering and joy:
After you have emptied the cup of suffering,
Then comes the cup of blessing.
How can a son not receive chastening from his father?
A gardener's pruning has no ill intent;
Only to ensure that the tree bears good fruit.
Without fire, how can impurities be separated from gold?
Without striking the iron, how can it become a utensil?
Without chiseling, how can jade become a piece of art?
Without pressing, how can grapes become wine?

Suffering is an integral part of God's work in shaping his children to reflect his character and nature. My first response must not be subjective, but objective in looking to Jesus the author and perfecter (*teleiotes*) of our faith. God is our loving and sovereign Father in the heavens (as Dallas Willard expresses). Nothing comes to us without first passing through his hand of permission. If he permits it, I can accept it, though that may well require some wrestling. Everything he allows to come to me is good. His will cannot be improved upon. He is more interested in how we respond to suffering than the suffering itself. If suffering was a vehicle in making Jesus fully equipped to be our Savior (Hebrews 2:10), how much more so in us as his servants, with all of our defects in character.

In ministry, a good part of suffering comes at the hand of others. People say and do things that hurt us. It may be an individual's cruel or not-so-subtle comment, the action of a board that determines our future in ways we hadn't planned, or the derision of a skeptic. Like everyone else, not only do we suffer from our professional hazards, we have wives and children and those relationships result in hurt and misunderstanding.

Not only are we to accept these confluences of hurt as permitted from a loving and sovereign heavenly Father, we are mandated to forgive one another even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven us.

Ken Sande in his book, *Peacemakers*, states that forgiveness requires four promises:

1. I will not dwell on this any more
2. I will never bring this up again
3. I will not talk to others about this
4. I will not allow this to interfere with our relationship.

Those are four very powerful commitments and will provide the foundation to our coping successfully with hurts and disappointments in a way that will heal relationships and bring glory to God. After all, those are really the core values we hold as followers of Jesus—aren't they?

Here is concluding challenge from the pen of Oswald Chambers...

The Source of Abundant Joy

"In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us"
(Romans 8:37).

Paul was speaking here of the things that might seem likely to separate a saint from the love of God. But the remarkable thing is that *nothing* can come between the love of God and a saint. The things Paul mentioned in this passage can and do disrupt the close fellowship of our soul with God and separate our natural life from Him. But none of them is able to come between the love of God and the soul of a saint on the spiritual level. The underlying foundation of the Christian faith is the undeserved, limitless miracle of the love of God that was exhibited on the Cross of Calvary; a love that is not earned and can never be. Paul said this is the reason that "in all these things we are more than conquerors." We are super-victors with a joy that comes from experiencing the very things which look as if they are going to overwhelm us.

Huge waves that would frighten an ordinary swimmer produce a tremendous thrill for the surfer who has ridden them. Let's apply that to our own circumstances. The things we try to avoid and fight against—tribulation, suffering, and persecution—are the very things that produce abundant joy in us. "We are more than conquerors through Him" "*in* all these things"; not in spite of them, but in the midst of them. A saint doesn't know the joy of the Lord in spite of tribulation, but *because* of it. Paul said, "I am exceedingly joyful in all our tribulation" (2 Corinthians 7:4).

The undiminished radiance, which is the result of abundant joy, is not built on anything passing, but on the love of God that nothing can change. And the experiences of life, whether they are everyday events or terrifying ones, are powerless to "separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39).