

## The Christian And Suffering

### Introduction

One of the things that has caused a great deal of distress to Christian believers is the fact that God's children suffer. Why is it that those who love and follow the Lord Jesus Christ are often afflicted, and sometimes far more than those who don't follow him? That distress has been increased by some who have taught, contrary to the teaching of the Bible and the experience of Christians down the centuries, that if you become a Christian believer, then all your troubles are over! And that kind of teaching has driven some sorely tried Christians into despair. So the problem of suffering is a very real difficulty for Christian believers to think about.

As with all things in the Christian life, we need to turn to the Bible to see what God has to teach us about suffering. This will also direct us to the help that God gives to Christian believers for such testing times.

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June 1995

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### Chapter 1 Why we suffer

#### a) We live in a fallen world

The first question we must examine is, 'Why is there suffering in the world at all?' This has often puzzled many because the Bible teaches us that when God created the world, he said that it was very good (Genesis 1:31). So what has gone wrong? The reason is that the world today is quite different from when God created it. And that is

because it has become a fallen world. By that we mean it is a world that has fallen into sin. Sin has entered the world. We learn about this in Genesis chapter 3. Adam and Eve, the first man and woman, disobeyed God's command not to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Because they disobeyed him, they sinned, and God has judged mankind, and the whole of creation suffers as a result.

God told Adam and Eve that if they disobeyed him they would die. So death has now come into the world – that is, spiritual death whereby sinners are separated from God, and physical death, and consequently all the suffering that eventually leads up to that. In fact, even the ground was cursed by God as punishment for man's disobedience. We read in Genesis 3:17-19, where God is speaking,

*“To Adam he said, ‘Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat of it’, cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.’”*

So we see that the whole of creation was thrown into turmoil because of man's sin. And suffering is a part of the consequences of man's disobedience. We live in a sinful, a fallen world and, therefore, part of our lot as people is that we shall suffer, whether we are Christian believers or not. Thankfully, when the Lord Jesus Christ returns to earth

again, the world will be changed, and there will be a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness, when all these things will be done away with, and when there will be no more suffering for the people of God. (See 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1-4.) But that is in the future, and until then, we have to share in the common lot of all mankind because we live in a world affected by man's sinfulness.

### **b) For God's glory and our holiness**

Now it is at this point that we need to be very careful. Some people have concluded from what we have just said, that when anyone suffers it is as a direct result of some wickedness in their own lives. They say that those who suffer must have committed some great sin, or else they would not be suffering. Well, is this correct? This is an important question and the Bible answers it in two ways.

i. We must say that not all suffering we endure is necessarily as a direct result of something which we ourselves have done wrong. We have an example of this in John's Gospel chapter 9. One day Jesus met a man who had been born blind, and when the disciples saw him they asked Jesus, "*Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*" They were really following the teaching of the religious leaders of their day. They reasoned that if death came into the world because of sin, then there can be no personal suffering without someone doing wrong. They even taught that a child could commit some sin in its mother's womb before it was born, and that this would result in the baby suffering in some way! Jesus' answer is interesting because it shows that this popular

approach to suffering was quite mistaken. This is what he said, "*Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened that the work of God might be displayed in his life.*" In other words, he was not born blind because either he or his parents had done something dreadfully wrong. Rather, it was going to be used by Jesus to bring glory to God. God was using this man's suffering to bring him great blessing. That was seen on that occasion by Jesus restoring the man's sight.

Those who quickly jump to the same conclusion as these disciples did, can be very unkind to the person who is suffering by telling them they are guilty of something dreadful, when they may not be. Further, this kind of thinking fails to recognise something much more fundamental, for we are all sinners. We all do wrong, and sadly we have to say that we do so many times in a day. So to reason like that would mean either that we would all be in terrible agony or distress all the time, or that we were claiming to be perfect – which, of course, none of us is! There are, however, some occasions that are obviously the result of doing wrong, such as the punishment of Pharaoh, in the book of Exodus. But it is not so in every case, and we need to be very careful before we make harsh statements about the reason why a particular person is suffering at any one time.

ii. Having said that not all suffering is the direct result of someone doing something wrong, there are times when it is. At this point we are referring specifically to Christian believers. Because God loves us, when we foolishly disobey him, then he may have to chasten us to

correct us, in the same way that all good parents discipline their children when they are naughty. We are taught this in Hebrews 12:4-11. The passage is dealing with this whole matter of sin in the believer's life, and this is what it teaches:

*“In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: ‘My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.’ Endure hardship as discipline: God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”*

There are times when God has to correct his children because we have done wrong. And so he ‘chastens’ or ‘disciplines’ us. And on occasions he uses suffering, and even persecution, to both correct us and instruct us so that

we develop as godly Christians. So when a Christian believer suffers, it is right that we examine our hearts to see if this has come upon us because of our foolishness. We need to ask, what is the Lord teaching me? What is he saying to me? What does he want me to learn? Is there an area of my life that I need to put right? And if there is, then we need to repent and ask for his forgiveness, remembering the Lord has brought affliction into our lives because he loves us. This will help us not to despair at such times, but to come to him confessing our guilt and seeking his mercy. (See 1 John 1:5-10.)

So we need to keep these two things in balance. Not all suffering is the direct result of some sin that we have personally committed, but some suffering is. With the latter, it is usually not very difficult, if we are Christian believers, to discover the reason, because we have new hearts that make us long to be like Jesus and we are, therefore, sensitive to sin in our lives.

We can see that Christians suffer because we live in a sinful world. We also suffer because God wants to glorify his name in our lives, and because God is making us more holy, more like the Lord Jesus Christ. Other reasons will become apparent in the following chapters.

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## **Chapter 2 Suffering tests and strengthens true faith**

The Bible teaches us that sometimes God allows and even sends suffering to us in order to test and strengthen our faith. Reading that statement may cause you to wonder why the faith of the Christian believer needs to be tested at all? The answer to that is to see if it is real – if it is genuine faith. This is necessary because there is such a

thing as false faith. This is counterfeit faith and, therefore, is not saving faith. For example, you will know that valuable things have been copied over the years. Just recently when I went shopping I went to pay for the items I had bought and the person taking my money put it under a special light. She did that because some people had tried to buy things with forged banknotes! I was glad, by the way, to know that mine was a genuine one. But it is like that with faith. It is something that can be copied so that it appears at first to be the real thing.

Now you may be wondering why anyone would want to copy true faith? There are really two main reasons.

i. It is that old problem of sin again. Because of sin, the human heart does not want to accept what God has to say about it. For example, our pride hates owning up to being wrong. Yet in order to become a Christian believer, you must first of all admit that you are a sinner. But many people do not want to do that. So they pretend to be Christians, when they are not Christians at all! Added to that, because of sin the human heart is deceitful. We read in Jeremiah 17:9, *“The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”* So our hearts can easily deceive us into thinking all is well with us and God when, in fact, it is not so at all.

ii. The second reason for some people wanting to copy true faith is the work of Satan, the devil, the great enemy of God and men. We read about his activity in men’s hearts in 2 Corinthians 4:4: *“The god of this age (that is a reference to Satan) has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of*

*Christ, who is the image of God.”*

You see, Satan hates the Lord Jesus and, therefore, does his utmost to keep people from following him. One of the subtlest ways is that he tricks people into thinking what fine Christians they are, and what marvellous faith they have got, when they are not Christian believers at all! He is called the *‘father of lies’* by Jesus in John 8, and that passage has a direct bearing on what we are discussing because Jesus was talking to very religious people who thought they were true believers. This is what Jesus said in John 8:44-45:

*“You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me!”*

That is the second reason why some people have false faith. The devil, or Satan, deceives them. And it is important they realise this and truly trust in Jesus before it is too late. And that is why faith is tested through trial and suffering, to show if it is real or not.

There are several people in the Bible who pretended to be believers, but who were not. We meet a man called Simon in Acts 8. He had been a sorcerer and kept the people in the city of Samaria under his power and influence. But then the Lord sent Philip to Samaria to tell the people about Jesus and how he alone could save them from their sin. Many of the people believed and were baptised. They were set free from Simon’s evil powers and began to

follow the Lord Jesus Christ. It is interesting that we read that Simon himself believed and was baptised in Acts 8:13. But his faith was not true saving faith. It was false faith. Philip had been gifted by the Lord Jesus in a special way. He was able to perform great signs and miracles, and Simon was attracted by this. A little later, when the apostles Peter and John visited Samaria and many people received the Holy Spirit, Simon wanted the same power for himself. Indeed, we read that he offered the apostles money and tried to buy it. That is in verses 18 and 19. Peter recognised immediately that Simon was not a real believer at all. He was only interested in having power over the people. These are Peter's words in Acts 8:20-23:

*“Peter answered: ‘May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.’”*

It seems Simon had only said he believed because he was jealous of Philip and the apostles, but he had not really trusted in Jesus at all. His faith was false. It was not genuine.

Another example of false faith is found in John 6. There were quite a group of people who claimed to be Jesus' disciples, but when he spoke about himself as the bread of life in John 6, we read in verse 66, *“From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.”*

And the most tragic case of all was Judas Iscariot. Judas, you will remember, betrayed Jesus into the hands of those who crucified him, because he loved money rather than God. He was paid 30 pieces of silver for his deadly work of betrayal. We read in Matthew 26:24 these words that Jesus spoke in the upper room the night before he was killed: *“The Son of Man (that is Jesus himself) will go just as it has been written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.”*

So you see, it is very easy to have false faith, to pretend to be a Christian believer, when you are not one at all. And that is why God tests believers to see if their faith is real, and at the same time to strengthen and encourage that faith. And he uses suffering and trials to achieve this. This is brought out for us in 1 Peter 1. Peter had been writing about the salvation that God gives to all who truly believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. And then he spoke about the trial or test of this faith in verses 6 and 7,

*“In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.”*

True faith is very precious, and it is trials of various kinds which demonstrate whether it is real or not, because true faith endures. It lasts. True believers still trust God even when they go through severe suffering. They do not give up following the Lord Jesus because of the difficulty that

has come their way. Instead, they realise they have to trust him more, to keep them and help them through the trial. And the result of all this, of course, is that their faith is not weakened by the trial but strengthened. It is like our muscles that grow and develop when we exercise them and put them through hard work. So faith, when it is tried, is proved to be genuine.

The opposite is also true. Suffering exposes false or counterfeit faith. This is taught in the familiar parable that Jesus told about the sower. It is interesting that this parable is recorded by Matthew, Mark and Luke, which tells us something of its importance. In that parable Jesus likened those who listen to his teaching to four different types of soil. His teaching was the seed, and the soils showed the different responses of people to what Jesus taught. Now the rocky soil was described like this by Jesus in Matthew 13:20 onwards:

*“The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away.”*

In Luke 8:13 he says simply, *“They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away.”* Those who have false faith are shown to be false when under test. When suffering comes to them they no longer follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

So in a very real way the trials Christian believers have to endure are a means of encouraging, rather than discouraging, their faith. We shall look into this in the

following chapters as we examine some of the helpful truths and promises God has given in the Bible to help us at such times.

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### **Chapter 3 A precious promise**

In this chapter we are going to be thinking about a wonderful statement that Moses made about God. It is found in Deuteronomy 33:27: *“The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.”* This is a lovely statement about the Lord, and it has been a source of help and comfort to believers in every age as they have experienced the truth that is revealed in it. So let us look at it in some detail.

#### **a) God is eternal**

When it speaks of God as being *‘eternal’*, what does that mean? In a sense this is something our finite minds cannot fully grasp, but simply it means that God has never had a beginning and will never have an end. He is outside of time, if you like. There has never been a time when God did not exist, and there never will be. He is eternal, or everlasting. And that reminds us that God is very different from us. We all had a beginning. But that is not the case with God. He has always been. He is the *‘I AM’* as we read in Exodus 3:14. And that means we must always remember to consider God with reverence and awe. But it also means much more.

It also means God never grows old like we do. As time passes, we discover our strength weakens. We grow frail and weary and tire easily. We discover we cannot do the things we used to be able to do when we were younger, and that can be very frustrating. But that never happens to

God. Because he is eternal, he does not get weak and wear out like we do. He does not grow weary. He never has to go to sleep to recuperate at the end of a busy day. There is another passage in the Bible that actually speaks about God in those very terms. It is Psalm 121:3-4: *“He (that is, God) will not let your foot slip – he who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.”* And Isaiah says something similar in Isaiah 40:28: *“Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no-one can fathom.”*

This means that God can help us at all times: day and night, winter and summer, and be with us in whatever we may have to face. His strength is the same today as it was a thousand years ago, and will be the same in a thousand years' time. So this truth about God in Deuteronomy 33 is very reassuring indeed. God is very wonderful. And what is so amazing, as a Christian hymn writer has put it, is that he *‘stoops to ask the love of our poor hearts’*.

### **b) God is our refuge**

Moses also said that *‘The eternal God is your refuge’*. First of all we must identify who these words were spoken to, to consider who the *‘your’* are, because it applies to them. They were the people of God, those whom God had chosen to be his very own. In Moses' time these were the people of Israel. They were people who trusted in God and followed him. Today, the name given to the people of God is *‘Christian believers’*. So this statement about God being a *‘refuge’* does not apply to people who are not believers.

And the importance of this is that to experience the comfort and help that this verse is telling us about, we must belong to the people of God ourselves. In other words, we must become followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Moses then described God as the *‘refuge’* of his people. The word *‘refuge’* means a place of shelter that gives you safety. For example, it could be somewhere to shelter from a storm. Or it could be a hiding place when being pursued by some enemy. Some years ago I visited a women's refuge near where I lived. In some ways it was very sad that there had to be such a place, because the women and children who lived there had been attacked by their husbands, and they had to come to this secret hiding place for their own protection. But they were all so grateful that that refuge existed. Indeed, when I knocked on the door it was obvious that they were very frightened because I was a man. They were afraid that I was one of the cruel husbands come to attack his wife. I can assure you that was not the case, but when I spoke with those dear people who lived there I began to understand how important the refuge was for them. The cruelty they had had to endure was horrific, and many of them had feared for their lives before coming to this place of safety. In a similar way God is a refuge for his people. Whatever we may have to face, and whenever and wherever that may be, the Christian believer can always turn to the Lord and know that he will keep them secure. Nothing can separate the believer from God. Nothing can stop God protecting and comforting his people, however dark their circumstances might be. Not even death can prevent God being the believer's place of

safety. He is always there for them, because he is eternal. And they are always safe in his hands.

A similar passage is found in John 10:27-30. Jesus said,

*“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.”*

Christian believers are secure forever in God’s hands. And Paul also spoke about this in his letter to the Romans in chapter 8. At the end of the chapter in verses 38 and 39 are some really encouraging words. He writes,

*“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

It is not that Christian believers will never suffer, because throughout our lives we do. But what is so wonderful is that God is with us through everything we have to endure. Every attack of the enemy, every tragedy, every illness, every temptation, every persecution, and whatever else we might like to think of, even death itself cannot sever us from the Lord and his everlasting love.

### **c) God is our upholder**

Returning to Deuteronomy 33:27, Moses added the words, *‘and underneath are the everlasting arms’*. That means that God always carries and upholds his children. It does

not matter how low they feel they are sinking as the pressures of life bear in upon them. The Lord is always underneath them to sustain and keep them. The follower of the Lord Jesus can never fall beneath those arms, because they are always underneath us to carry us through. They are *‘everlasting arms’* and something that is everlasting never ceases.

This really is a very encouraging verse for us, especially when we are going through a period of suffering. To know that God is our refuge and that he upholds us, is very special indeed.

### **d) The testimony of Mary Thorby**

Someone who has known these truths about God in a helpful way in her life is Mary Thorby. Mary is a believer who has had to endure an enormous amount of difficulty in her own life, yet has proved the truth of God’s promise in that verse in her own experience. Even before she became a follower of the Lord Jesus, which was when she was aged 16, Mary had experienced a lot of sadness in her life. Her father, whom she loved dearly, became very ill and died when she was aged 9. The loss was devastating, and it resulted in the family having to be split up. Her mother had to find work, which entailed moving away with Mary’s younger sister, and Mary had to go and live with her aunt and uncle. She missed her mother and sister greatly during this period. But her aunt and uncle were Christian believers, and so Mary went with them to many Christian meetings and heard about the Lord Jesus regularly.

Then her sister became seriously ill with scarlet fever and nearly died, which was another ordeal for young Mary to

go through. And added to that, Mary herself was often ill with severe chest infections during her childhood. Yet in spite of these set backs she became a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ when she heard how he had saved the woman at the well in Samaria, which is recorded in John's Gospel chapter 4.

Mary studied and became a teacher, and eventually married her husband, Derek. But that was not the end of Mary's difficulties. She became very ill with pneumonia, and her mother had to come and look after her. Sadly, her mother had only been with her for two days when she died. Mary was too ill to go to the funeral, but the Lord comforted her greatly, and she said, *"It was very amazing the day of the funeral. I just felt so peaceful."*

Mary and Derek had four children: three boys: Jeremy, Andrew and Philip, and one daughter: Elizabeth. They had several moves, due to Derek's work, but eventually came to live in the village of March in Cambridgeshire, England. By now Derek had progressed in his job and held a very responsible position. But then in 1973 tragedy struck yet again! Their daughter nearly died from glandular fever. Two days after she had returned from hospital Derek flew to an air show with a friend in an old Tiger Moth aircraft. The plane was involved in a terrible accident, and it crashed, killing Derek instantly. I asked Mary how she reacted to this shattering experience, and this is what she said, *"The Lord came and gave me such calm, just as if he took over. And I knew that for the family I had to rest and throw myself on him. And he just carried me through that completely."*

Mary knew the *'everlasting arms'* of God underneath her, carrying her through, sustaining her, comforting her and helping her. He really has been her refuge in each deep distress. Losing her husband was not the last of Mary's difficulties. Many other things have happened since then in her family which have been quite traumatic. For example, the wife of her oldest son, Jeremy, had a miscarriage when she was 5 months pregnant. Then when she did have a child, he was born with Down's Syndrome and died when he was two. So, really, Mary has not only suffered personally, but has known suffering in her family as well. And yet in spite of it all, Mary has experienced this great fact, that the eternal God is her refuge, and underneath her are his everlasting arms. She knows full well that she could not have come through these harrowing trials without the Lord's help. But having come to trust in the Lord Jesus as her Saviour, God has enfolded her in his love and has kept her through it all. And that same help is promised to all who truly follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

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#### **Chapter 4 Learning through suffering**

One of the great benefits of suffering for Christian believers is that they experience at first hand the comfort which the Lord gives to those who trust him. This in turn enables them to help others when they go through similar experiences. We experience the Lord's compassion ourselves in order that we may be compassionate towards others in their trials.

##### **a) The apostle Paul's experience**

The great apostle Paul knew a great deal about this. He tells us on a number of occasions of some of the sufferings

he had to endure. For example, in 2 Corinthians 11, as he is defending his right to be an apostle, he contrasts his own sufferings with those who were pretending to be great servants of Christ. In verse 23 onwards he writes,

*“Are they servants of Christ? ... I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.”*

An impressive list of sufferings, to say the least! Yet in all of this he never once grew bitter against God. Instead, in these sufferings he experienced the Lord's comfort in a remarkable way. And in the very first chapter of that same second letter to the Corinthians, he writes in verses 3 and 4,

*“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.”*

He was thankful to God because through his own sufferings he came to experience the comfort and consolation of the Lord, and that in turn prepared him to comfort other believers when they went through their own periods of suffering. Someone has rightly said that we shall not experience dying grace until we come to die, and similarly we do not experience God's sustaining grace until we go through hardship and difficulty. But Paul had been through such pressing circumstances, and in them had learned about God's sustaining mercy. This in turn prepared him to show the love of God to others with a real compassion.

#### **b) The testimony of Mark Taylor**

A present day Christian believer who has had a similar experience is Mark Taylor. Mark is married and has two children, and for most of his working life has worked in a garage. He came to know the Lord Jesus Christ as his Saviour when he was aged 10. In recent years Mark has had to struggle with a very weakening illness. He has suffered from myalgic encephalomyelitis, or M.E. for short. In most cases this is brought on by a virus and can even damage the brain. Mark told me that sufferers experience depression, mood swings, stress, aches, pains, lack of energy, and generally feel completely ill and exhausted. Most M.E. sufferers will suffer from all of those symptoms at the same time. Mark has suffered from M.E. for over five years now, and for most of that time has been unable to work and to do very little else as he has lost a great deal of strength.

Naturally, this has affected Mark spiritually. Few people

understand this illness and he has been tempted to doubt God's presence. However, the Lord has helped him to realise that through this trial he has been teaching him valuable lessons. He has come to realise his illness is not a punishment for doing something wrong, but a learning period where he has discovered the presence and help of God in a way he had not realised before. God is in truth his caring heavenly Father. Through this time his spiritual life has improved. Being off work he has had more time to reflect on God, to read the Bible more thoroughly and to pray more, with the result that God is more real to him now and he is walking much closer with him. When I asked him what were the most important lessons he had learned through his illness, this is how he answered me: *"Prayer, and increasing my understanding of faith in God, holding on to him in a trust I've not known to this depth before."* He explained how he had recently said to someone, *"I wouldn't have had it any other way. I'd much rather have gone through this suffering and learnt what I've learnt than not gone through it, and still been going on on a lower level."*

I asked Mark what he would say to another Christian believer who was suffering in a similar way, and who was feeling depressed and very discouraged. This was his answer, *"Firstly, you've just got to accept this is a period of suffering. Accept that God loves you, as hard as it seems to accept. The important thing is not to leave God out of your time each day. Speak to him, talk to him, remind him of your love – remind yourself that you love him and that he loves you. Constantly refer to his word,*

*the Bible, and read from that and gain encouragement there. It's no good dwelling on the problem. In one sense that would appear to be selfish because you're thinking about self and it's self-pity. And it's understandable when you're going through that time of suffering to think, 'Well, I don't want this. I'd rather be rid of it.' But there's always light at the end of the tunnel, and God is so precious to us, and we need just to allow him to work in us when we're suffering. And at the end of the day when we've gone along that road of suffering for some time, we can then look back and say, 'Yes, God was with us, and he helped us through.'"*

Mark Taylor has learned a great deal from the Lord during the past five long, painful and weakening years. God has comforted him, and now he is able to comfort others. He has experienced the truth of Isaiah 26:3 in a remarkable way. This is what that verse says, *"You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you."* That is an assurance from God that all who truly trust him will experience and enjoy his serenity in their lives. And more than that, they will be kept in that peace by God. Whatever circumstances arise, even those that may bring great turmoil to their lives, throughout it all they will know God's peace. And this is a tremendous promise for God's children when they go through periods of suffering. We must remember it lays before us two conditions that are very important to notice and fulfil. The believer who will experience this inner help from God is described firstly, as someone *'whose mind is steadfast'*, and secondly, who *'trusts'* in God. In other words it's a

promise for those who will trust God with their entire lives, and who will do so continually. Mark Taylor has learned to do just that, and has enjoyed that inner peace which only God can give when his children suffer. Now he is able to share these lessons with others with a sensitivity and compassion that has come from enduring such trials himself.

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## **Chapter 5 Suffering even though you are obedient**

### **a) The problem**

One of the things that often puzzle followers of the Lord Jesus Christ is that trials and difficulties can come to Christian believers even when they are obeying God. It is interesting to discover that there are a number of examples of this in the Bible itself, and in this chapter we shall refer to a few of them and look at one incident in detail.

As early as the opening chapters of the Bible we discover in Genesis 4 that godly Abel was murdered by his brother Cain. Then probably the most famous example in the Old Testament is Job. There is a whole book dedicated to his experience, and in Job 1:1 he is described as one who was *“blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil”*. Yet still he suffered. This is something we find in the New Testament as well. We saw in the previous chapter how that very faithful and useful servant of the Lord Jesus Christ, Paul, delighted to serve God, and yet he suffered greatly in the process. He gives us a list of his sufferings in 2 Corinthians 11. So we see that this was something common to believers in the Old Testament and the New, and it’s something that can and does happen to Christian believers today.

### **b) A storm**

There is one incident in Matthew 8 that is very instructive and we need to look at in more detail. We have the record of something that happened to Jesus’ disciples even when he was with them. This is what we read in Matthew 8:23-27:

*“Then he (ie. Jesus) got into the boat and his disciples followed him. Without warning, a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. The disciples went and woke him, saying, ‘Lord, save us! We’re going to drown!’ He replied, ‘You of little faith, why are you so afraid?’ Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. The men were amazed and asked, ‘What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!’”*

Now you can see that when Jesus got into the boat the disciples followed him. So they were doing exactly what they were supposed to do. Jesus had called a number of them to be his disciples with those very words, *‘Follow me’*. So we have to say that these men were not rebelling or refusing to follow him. They were not making excuses, but actually went with him. They were really being obedient. One thing they could not be accused of was being guilty of some great sin. And yet we discover that while they were following the Lord Jesus, and were with him in the boat, they met a life-threatening situation that frightened them very much indeed. A storm arose. And it must have been a very bad storm, because some of these men were fishermen, who had been in many storms before,

but this one filled them with terror, and they thought they were going to drown.

### c) Important lessons

i. The lesson we are to learn from this is that Christian believers, even when they are obeying the Lord and are following him very closely (remember, these men were in the boat WITH Jesus) often meet difficulty and hardship. But this does not mean the Lord is angry with them or displeased in some way or other. It is important for us to grasp this lesson because it is easy to think that way when our circumstances are adverse and we are suffering. In fact, very often Christians suffer because they ARE obedient to God. And that is reassuring, because one of the ways the devil attacks believers is to make them think God is not pleased with them, and he often does that when we go through suffering of various kinds. And he will even tempt us to think that God has deserted us altogether. But as we can see from this incident that is not so. These disciples were following Jesus very closely. So there is comfort here for us, as Christian believers.

ii. There is something else we learn from this incident, and it is a very precious thing. Jesus was WITH them through it all. He was in the boat with them. You see, this storm did not separate them from him, nor could it. And that is true for every follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, in whatever trial they face. Suffering does not mean that the Lord has forgotten or neglected us. He is right there with us, all the time.

You may recall that Jesus said something about this just before he ascended to heaven. In Matthew 28:20 we have

a very precious promise that Jesus gave his followers, as he was about to leave them. Jesus said, "*And surely I am with you always, to the end of the age.*" That is a lovely promise. To know that the Lord Jesus is with us during the good times and the difficult times is a tremendous comfort. He is there to hold and uphold us, to give us strength to cope with each difficulty, for us to talk to and share all our concerns and worries, just as his disciples did here when they cried out, "*Lord, save us! We're going to drown!*" And this is true even when we panic and get frightened and our faith is very small and weak. Just look at these disciples in the boat. In fear they woke Jesus. He had been asleep and they were filled with terror. And although the Lord pointed out to them that their faith was small, he did not cast them off and reject them. No! He stayed with them and cared for them. While we ought not to get frightened as followers of the Lord Jesus, because he is the Son of God and has promised to help us through our sufferings, we still do. Often our faith is just like those twelve men with Jesus in that boat. We can be so overwhelmed by the storm that is raging around us in our own individual situations that we can forget that the Lord is in control of all things. He is the mighty God who cannot fail his children. But we are often weak and frail, and forget this. But our weakness does not hinder him caring for us, nor make him desert us in our hour of need. What a wonderful Saviour and Friend the Lord Jesus is to his followers! We really can be in the care of no one better.

iii. There is one further lesson in this passage which is very important but which we might easily overlook. While

we do not always understand why we go through periods of suffering, the Lord uses such times to teach us more about himself. On this occasion the disciples witnessed something very remarkable. We read, *“Then he (that is Jesus) got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm.”* The Lord taught his disciples that he really was Lord of all. That he was and is in control, even of the storms, and that they all are subject to him. They discovered through this experience that he is very powerful, and is well able to keep and protect and care for his followers. We read what the disciples said after the storm in Matthew 8:27, *“The men were amazed and asked, ‘What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!’”* You see, their understanding of the Lord grew because of that frightening experience. They realised that Jesus was much more than an ordinary man. It began to dawn on them that he was, in fact, God as well as being a man. For only God can control the winds and the waves like that. Jesus used this event to display something of his divine authority and power and grace. So through this trial the Lord Jesus taught his disciples a very precious truth. And he does the same with us, so often, when we go through periods of suffering. Many Christian believers have experienced that – and especially that they have appreciated the presence of the Lord in a much deeper way as a result of their sufferings.

#### **d) The testimony of Rene Baker**

One such believer is Rene Baker. I met her some little time ago and she shared how she had been through a frightening and painful experience, but was wonderfully

conscious of the Lord’s help. Rene is over eighty now, but this took place much earlier in her life. I had noticed she used a walking stick and wondered why. She told me she had an artificial leg. When she was only 27 she came out of the chapel one Sunday morning and a car mounted the pavement and ran over her, breaking both her legs. She was very ill and this resulted in a five-month stay in hospital during which time her left leg was amputated. What complicated matters was that she was pregnant at the time. She said to me, *“During the first 12 months after I was run over, I have never known such freedom from the devil and his darts as I did in that 12 months. I’m sure that God knew I’d got quite enough to bear without being tempted by him, so at least my mind was at rest although my body wasn’t.”* I asked Rene how the Lord helped her to cope with having an artificial leg, especially being a young mother at the same time. Her reply was delightful to hear. *“It was wonderful. It was marvellous. My father-in-law, who was a very godly man indeed, asked me ‘How are you going to manage with it? What will you do?’ I said, ‘He’ll take care of me; he’ll take care of everything. I don’t know what we’ll do, but I shall manage. God will help me through.”* And the Lord did exactly that, and through it all Rene Baker has proved the goodness of God.

So we have seen that both those first disciples of Jesus and Rene Baker were seeking to do the Lord’s will, yet they faced severe trial. However, they did experience the presence and help of the Lord Jesus Christ in a new way – which would not have happened if they had not gone through those sufferings. Today you might be going

through such a period of suffering, and may have been tempted to think something is very wrong or that the Lord has left you alone. These verses about the stilling of the storm in Matthew 8 are a real help, because they teach us that suffering does not always come because of our disobedience, and that through such periods the Lord himself is with us. And that means we can tell him about our needs and even our fears, with the assurance he will not cast us off or turn us away, but will help us. May you draw strength from that and know the Lord's presence in a new way.

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## **Chapter 6 God is sovereign in all things**

The statements about God in the Bible have always been a source of strength to Christian believers, especially during times of trial and suffering. In this chapter we are going to look at one of these. It's found in Romans 8:28. And this is what it says: *“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”*

### **a) All things**

A question that this verse raises is this: ‘When it says *“In all things God works for the good of those who love him”*, does that really mean in everything?’ And the answer is simply, yes. It means exactly that. There is nothing that happens to us that is outside God's control, and if we are followers of the Lord Jesus, then everything that takes place in our lives he has promised to use for our good.

However, this raises a problem, because some of the things that happen to us are not good. In fact, some of them are the very opposite. Just think, for example, of accidents, or

losing your job, or being ill, or the tragedies that we find in the world. So the question is raised, ‘Surely we cannot say that these things are good things, can we?’ Now this is perfectly true, and actually very helpful. It raises a very important point which is this – we need to read the Bible very carefully to see what it actually says and not what we think it says. In Romans 8:28 you will notice that it does not say, ‘All things are good’, but rather that *“in all things God works for the good of those who love him”*. This is quite different from saying that all things are good. This verse does not say that at all. In fact it makes a statement that is very wonderful indeed. Not all things are good, but God uses all things to do us good. The verse does not say that everything that happens to us is good in itself. But it does say that God uses everything that does happen to us to bring us good from it. And that means even those unpleasant experiences of life.

### **b) The good God intends**

The way in which God overrules everything so that it does us good, is explained in his great purpose for each Christian believer which is summarised for us in the next verse in Romans 8:29: *“For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.”* God's great purpose for every true follower of the Lord Jesus Christ is to make us more and more like our Saviour. And he uses all kinds of things, including suffering, to draw us closer to him. Sufferings help us to trust the Lord more and more. They make us aware of our need of him, and they stimulate us to pray more, because we realise we need

God's help. And through all of this we grow as Christians, and become more and more like the Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, this verse tells us that God will not allow anything to happen to us which will ultimately do us harm and hinder his great plan for our lives. So it really is an amazing promise.

### c) The people who benefit from this promise

A further question about Romans 8:28 needs to be considered. To whom does it apply? Who is it for? And the verse tells us two things about those to whom it applies. The first thing is that they love God. And that means that God is very precious to them. They love him because of who he is and what he is like. He is the only true and living God. He is holy and wise and good. He is all-powerful, and gracious and kind. In fact, these people realise that everything about God is very wonderful, and they especially love God because he first loved them. God's love is something quite remarkable, because in his love, God sent his one and only Son, Jesus, into the world to save sinners. And those who love God know that he sent the Lord Jesus Christ into the world to carry the punishment which their sins deserved when he died on the cross. And because of that, God has forgiven them for all their sins. And that is why they love God.

The second way they are identified is very interesting. They are described as those "... *who have been called according to his purpose*" – that is, God's purpose. Every time the good news about the Lord Jesus is shared with someone, in effect God is calling them to become his follower. But, sadly, many people do not heed that call. It

is as if they are spiritually deaf to God's voice. And that is true, of course. In Ephesians 2 Paul gives us a description of his readers before they became followers of the Lord Jesus: "... *you were dead in your transgressions and sins...*" And that meant, of course, that they had no spiritual life. And just as a dead person cannot speak or hear, so before someone becomes a Christian believer they are spiritually lifeless and deaf. Now when someone is truly called by God, "... *called according to his purpose...*" God gives the ability to hear his call to those he has planned to bring into his kingdom. It has been described as God's effectual call. In other words, when the good news about the Lord Jesus is told, there are those who know God is speaking to them. They may have heard about Jesus a thousand times before, but it seemed to make no impression in their lives. But then God works by his Holy Spirit, and these same people begin to hear his voice clearly. And the result is, they accept Jesus as their Saviour and begin to follow him as their Lord.

There is a lovely description of this in a Christian hymn written by Horatius Bonar. It says, "*I heard the voice of Jesus say, 'Come unto me and rest; lay down, you weary one, lay down your head upon my breast!' I came to Jesus as I was, weary, and worn, and sad; I found in him a resting-place, and he has made me glad.*" You see, Horatius Bonar wrote those words from his own experience. There was a time in his life when he heard the Lord call to him, and he could not resist any longer. It was as if all the barriers had been swept away.

The important lesson we must grasp is that this promise in

Romans 8:28 is only true for Christian believers. Every Christian believer can rest assured that whatever happens to them, even hard and testing experiences will be used by God for their good. In fact, absolutely nothing that happens to the Lord's followers is outside of this promise. In everything God works for the good of those who love him, whom he has called according to his purpose. (See also Joseph's testimony in Genesis 45:8 and 50:20.)

#### **d) The testimony of Joan Langton**

I want to share with you how this promise was experienced by Joan Langton. Joan is a Christian believer who lives in Australia, and she visited me a little while ago to tell me about it. It was to do with one of her children. She had four sons. The first two were healthy but the third one, who was called John, had Down's Syndrome and died just before his first birthday. Joan and her husband, Clifford, loved John very much and losing him was a painful experience. Joan shared with me what she felt when he died. *"... Although we were warned, it was a shock to us, and in some ways a relief in that we knew he had been suffering towards the end with his heart. He used to cry, and so in that sense we thought it was a relief to him, and we just trust that he's with the Lord."* When asked how the Lord helped her through this bereavement, Joan said, *"Well, we understood the sovereignty of God in a way we hadn't before. We say all things work together for good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose. That's all right while things are going well but when things go against us we are cast on the promises of God in those times. We knew that God was in all of this."*

*God had taken him and whatever happened his ways were perfect. Knowing this took the bitterness out of it for us. We just saw the whole thing as from the Lord. It was humbling, too, because the other two children had been so healthy, and we had probably taken some of the credit for that to ourselves. But God had given us the healthy ones and he had given us the one that was sickly, and in it all he had a purpose and we were cast on the Lord a lot more for the frail one than we had been for the others. It taught us to walk closer with God and with Christ. It also strengthened our confidence in God, because he's an ever present help in time of trouble, and I think, really, in those times that we become more established in our confidence in him than we do in easier times."*

To know that God is in absolute control of our lives is one of the greatest comforts that the followers of the Lord Jesus are given. And it is particularly helpful during days of suffering to know that God is using our trials to bring us great spiritual blessings. For Joan Langton the death of her little baby helped to develop and strengthen her trust in God. And in this difficulty, she and her husband, Clifford, became more aware of the Lord's presence with them. May the truth of this lovely promise really help and strengthen you in the trials and difficulties you may be facing right now.

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## **Chapter 7 The Lord's unfailing love**

### **a) The love of God**

One of the great benefits that Christian believers enjoy is that the love of God constantly surrounds and upholds them. Our first awareness of this love comes when we

begin to follow the Lord Jesus Christ and he forgives all our sins. But that important first experience opens up to us the vast ocean of God's loving care and kindness which keeps on flowing towards us throughout our lives. This is obvious when things go well with us, but it's equally true when life's journey takes us through dark valley-like experiences. God's love never fails those who trust in him.

This is how it's described in the Bible in Psalm 32 and verse 10: "*The Lord's unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him.*" It is interesting to note that Psalm 32 begins with the forgiveness of sins. David wrote, "*Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.*" And that experience of God's love led him to the conclusion in verse 10 that God's love envelops every believer.

Now there are a number of things in that statement about God's unfailing love that teach us it is something of great value.

- i. It is the "*LORD's*" unfailing love. That is the covenant name for God. It is the name which tells us God pledges himself to his children, and that he loves to draw near to them to do them good. His love is expressed in his mercy and his kindness.
- ii. His love is "*unfailing*" or steadfast. It never ceases to be lavished upon God's people. It never runs out or is diverted from its course. It can never be overcome or frustrated. No enemy of God or of his people can make this love to fail. There will never be a time when this love will not flow out of God's heart to his followers.

- iii. His love "*surrounds the man who trusts in him*". It literally enfolds the lives of those whose total dependence is placed in him. Through all their lives, with all the many and varied joys and trials, it never stops because God never stops caring for them.

### **b) The testimony of Eunice and Geoffrey Harmer**

This unfailing love of God has been a real source of strength and comfort to Eunice and Geoffrey Harmer. They have been believers for many years, and a few years ago Eunice was very ill with a tumour on the pituitary gland. What complicated things was that at first the tumour was not recognised. Her eyesight was affected because the growth was pressing on the optic nerve and the doctors thought it was some kind of migraine as the symptoms were similar. However, as things continued to get worse further tests indicated the source of the problem and Eunice had to go through major brain surgery.

It was a really stressful and testing time for Eunice and her husband, Geoffrey, and it was a tough time spiritually as well. But in it all the Lord drew very near to them both. They were surrounded by the love and prayers of many of the Lord's people and they knew this was because of the Lord's care for them at that time. Because Eunice could not read due to her illness, her husband and daughter recorded a number of the Psalms on tape so that she could hear them. Added to that many cards were sent to them with Bible verses on them. And again and again there were references to the Lord's unfailing love, including Psalm 32:10. Eunice and Geoffrey knew that this was the Lord's way of assuring them of his care and concern for them in

this trial. They knew they could simply rest in him with quiet and confident trust.

A verse that was particularly helpful to Geoffrey was Psalm 20:7: *“Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.”* Geoffrey has always found illness difficult to deal with, and when the doctor began to explain what the operation entailed it was Geoffrey who felt unwell rather than Eunice! So he made this a special matter of prayer that the Lord would strengthen him. He was particularly anxious not to be a drain on his wife, but rather to be a support for her, and the Lord wonderfully answered prayer and sustained him.

Thankfully, the operation indicated the tumour was not malignant, and although Eunice’s sight is not fully restored, their testimony is that the Lord’s unfailing love has surrounded them, and continues to do so.

God has assured us that all who trust in the Lord Jesus Christ are surrounded by his love at all times. He never ever fails those who love him.

## **Chapter 8 Suffering that leads to conversion**

### **a) Suffering can be beneficial**

I suppose it is a natural tendency for us all to think that suffering must always be a negative thing. Most of us would prefer not to suffer at all. But we have seen on a number of occasions in this booklet that when God comes into our lives everything takes on a new outlook, and that applies even to suffering. He is able and does transform such times and uses them to bring us great spiritual blessings.

There’s a very interesting passage in the Bible where David speaks about the corrective benefits that can come out of suffering. His words refer to his own experience and this is what he wrote (Psalm 119:67): *“Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word.”* And then a few verses further on in verse 71: *“It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.”* In other words, David discovered that during periods of suffering he became aware both of his folly and sinfulness and of the right way to live. So God used these periods to teach him what was wrong in his life and to help him to do what is right. That’s a very humbling experience, of course, but the Lord in his wisdom and love sometimes has to bring us through periods of affliction in order to make us think about the sin in our lives and to compel us to listen to him carefully. And for this, David was extremely thankful to the Lord. There is the complete absence of bitterness or complaint against God. Instead there’s a humble acceptance of God’s goodness in using suffering to correct him.

### **b) The testimony of David Moran**

Over the years many Christian believers have experienced what David described in Psalm 119. God has used suffering to teach them about areas of their lives that need to be corrected. I want to share with you how in recent years this affected another David. This is a man named David Moran. This David comes from a small English country town called Hadleigh. And what’s interesting about him is that God used suffering to bring him to see his need of the Lord Jesus Christ and his forgiveness. David’s

a lovely Christian believer now, but his sufferings began before he became a follower of the Lord Jesus.

We need to go back to around 1978. David had gone to watch a football match with some friends in London. As he came out of the game a group of men attacked David and his friends. One man had his spectacles smashed into his eyes, while David was hit, knocked on the floor and kicked. A very unpleasant experience indeed. Very soon afterwards David went to a cinema to watch a film, and while he was there he was suddenly overcome with a severe panic attack which left him terrified, and this led on to nervous depression. This was a reaction to the assault after that football match. This began a long and difficult period of about four years during which he suffered increasing bouts of depression. He was on medication, and even collapsed once and had to be taken into hospital. Now David was not a Christian believer at that time, and God played no part in his thinking at all. His younger brother, Kevin, had become a Christian believer, and although David could see that Kevin's life was full and joyful while his own was miserable, he still did not give any thought at all to spiritual matters.

Things did not improve. He went to Spain for a holiday, but on the journey home these panic attacks hit with increased severity. He used to drink quite a lot of alcohol but found that this brought him no relief at all, and only seemed to make matters worse. During this period a number of his brother's Christian friends visited their home and talked with David about the Lord. He was given a copy of the New Testament by Kevin's pastor on the

condition that he promised to read it. He even came to some of the meetings of the Church, but after another holiday he simply forgot about God again. But still his sufferings did not ease. One night, while he was drinking in the pub with his friends, he felt absolutely desperate and alone. There seemed to be no one who could help him at all. And then a group of Christians came into the pub to sing some Christian hymns and to talk to the people about the Lord Jesus, and all this made David realise there must be more to life than he was experiencing. God was at work in his life, showing him his emptiness and sinfulness and need. David began to think more seriously about God and began to read that New Testament in secret. Reading about the miracles of the Lord Jesus and how he healed the sick really spoke to him, and he discovered that the Bible teaches us the way of salvation and how we can be right with God. He still carried on drinking with his friends until one night he realised that this was no help to him at all. He visited his brother's pastor again, who talked with him about the Lord Jesus Christ until the early hours of one morning. All the time a great struggle was going on in David's heart. As the pastor explained that God was holy and that David was sinful, he knew he had to seek God's forgiveness and give up his former way of life. Realising his need, he asked the Lord Jesus into his life, and this is how he described it: *"There was a battle, but I remember when I asked the Lord into my life I felt peace. I felt like John Bunyan's Pilgrim when he gave himself to the Lord, that the burden rolled off his shoulder, and that's how I felt. It was tremendous joy. It was the joy of knowing the Lord Jesus as my Saviour. It was the joy of knowing that*

*my sins had been forgiven, and the joy of knowing that one day I shall be going to heaven.”*

David Moran’s sufferings had brought him to the point where he realised he needed to have God in his life. Like David in Psalm 119 he could say, “*Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word... It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.*” The Lord used affliction to show him where he went astray and that he needed to put his trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and follow him. These were lessons David has taken very much to heart. He has acted upon them, and now has the assurance that he is in the care of God his heavenly Father.

### **c) Obeying God’s voice**

When God deals with us like that, the wisest and best thing we can ever do is to act upon all that he’s saying to us. We need to forsake our sinful behaviour, turn to the Lord Jesus Christ for forgiveness, and begin with his help to obey God. And it’s not only those who are not believers that God deals with in this way. He does so with his children, especially when in our folly we go astray. But he brings us through affliction at such times to make us wake up to our sinfulness because he wants to bless us. How kind and gracious God is to do that. He could so easily destroy us, but he doesn’t. He patiently and lovingly draws us back to himself. And he sometimes uses suffering to achieve that result.

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## **Chapter 9 Suffering and the presence of Christ**

### **a) Promises that count**

I think you will agree that promises, however marvellous they might sound, are really useless if they cannot be

fulfilled. For example, what is the use of promising someone you will pay their medical bills if you have not got any money! The promise sounds grand, but it is really quite useless because it cannot be fulfilled. A promise is only of any value when the person making the promise really keeps it.

It is easy to make promises that you do not intend to keep, and that is lying, of course. But it’s also possible sincerely to make a promise, and really mean what you say, but when the time comes to keep your word, you discover circumstances have arisen that prevent you from doing so. For example, that promise to pay someone’s medical bills. You might have genuinely made a promise like that, and had the money at the time to do what you had said, but then unexpected expenses arose that meant you had to spend your money on something else. Even though your promise was genuine at the time you made it, you could not keep it when it was needed. So really, even that was a promise that was not of great use to the person to whom you made it.

The promises of the Lord Jesus Christ are not at all like those we have just mentioned, because he never makes a promise that he does not intend to keep, and he never makes a promise he is unable to keep. And that means the promises of Jesus are very valuable indeed.

Now you may well be wondering why the promises of Jesus are so certain. Why can we be so sure that he will always keep his word? The answer lies in a number of things. Firstly, when Jesus was talking with his disciples one day he described himself in John 14:6 as “... *the*

truth...” *“I am the way and the truth and the life”*, he said. And because he is ‘the truth’ he never tells a lie. So he can never make a promise which he knows he cannot keep. And then, on another occasion, he told his disciples, *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”* That is found in Matthew 28:18. The word *“authority”* means he has dominion or rule over all things; he is in control of everything. In other words, he has the power and the ability to do whatever he pleases. So he is well able to keep his promises, because nothing happens outside of his control that could prevent him, and his power is limitless. When we add to these things the fact that Jesus is God – God the Son – we begin to understand that his promises are very special indeed. And we can rest assured that when we need him to keep his word, he will do just that.

### **b) The promises of Jesus and our suffering**

This is of particular interest to us in our look at the Christian and suffering, because it is when we face trial and affliction that we desperately need the Lord’s help. And of the many promises Jesus has given his followers is one where he assures us that he will never leave us alone. Matthew’s Gospel ends with these words: *“And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age.”* Jesus is really repeating the promise given to Joshua in the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy 31:8 Moses told Joshua,

*“The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.”*

The difference is that the promise found in Deuteronomy

was only applicable to one man, Joshua, but the promise that Jesus made applies to every one of his followers. So this promise is like an anchor for our souls when we are tossed too and fro by life’s storms. He will always be with those who trust in him. The Christian believer never faces suffering alone. The Lord Jesus is always with us. And that makes his promise more valuable than all the money in the world. Further, this underlines the urgency to ensure that we belong to Jesus and that he belongs to us.

### **c) The testimony of Brian Parkinson**

The reality of Jesus’ promise to be with his children whatever they may be facing, was experienced by a Christian believer named Brian Parkinson. Brian has been a follower of the Lord Jesus for a number of years now, but one day he came face to face with suffering of a kind that he had not expected. It was wintertime and he was driving his father’s car home along a narrow country lane that was unlit. He was travelling between 70 and 75 kilometres an hour. Suddenly, he noticed in his headlights a cyclist who had no lights on his bicycle. Aware he was going to hit him, he braked hard and went into a dangerous skid. He missed the cyclist but went head on into a car coming towards him on the other side of the road. He was dazed for a while but when he came round he could not get out of his car. He noticed his hand was injured but did not realise that there were more serious injuries. A girl came and talked with him for about an hour while the fire brigade came to release him from being trapped in the car. It was then that he was suddenly overwhelmed with pain. It was at that precise moment that something rather wonderful

happened. This is how he described it:

*“I’d completely dislocated my thumb; I’d cut my chin open, lost about six teeth, and had broken both legs, but I was very aware of the presence of the Saviour. He was very real to me at that time. I didn’t really pray to him. I didn’t need to because he came to me in my time of need. And they took me into the ambulance and one of the firemen got in with me, and I thought that was strange. I thought they wouldn’t normally do this, and I really thought I was dying. And on the journey to the hospital the Lord was really close to me and I sang his praise, ‘Lord Jesus, I love thee, I know thou art mine. For thee all the pleasures of sin I resign. Lord Jesus I love thee.’ And he just came to me in my time of need. He just propelled me and strengthened me. The words of Scripture came to me where it says, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’ And he was very real to me at that time. After I’d gone to hospital they operated on me that night. The following week when I was still quite ill I could really sense the prayers of the Lord’s people for me. It was quite an experience for me, one that I’d never felt before nor since. I could just feel the weight of the Lord’s people’s prayers, just upholding me and sustaining me. We often think, is there any point in praying? And we don’t really think that it’s having any effect on the situation, but I can assure you it is, because I could just feel it. It’s something I just grapple with words to describe. I just felt uplifted and supported and held, and the Lord was with me all this time and just kept me on this plane until such a time that he was able to lower me back down and put me on my own two*

*feet.”*

Brian was in hospital for three months and had to wear a calliper on his leg for nine months, during which period he was unable to work. Thankfully, he has now made a full recovery, but his experience of the Lord’s presence at that time of his special need was truly wonderful. Brian Parkinson has helped us to see that the Lord Jesus Christ really does keep his promises. Nothing that the Christian believer may have to endure, even suffering resulting from an unexpected accident, is able to prevent him being with his followers. Indeed, such times really become the occasion where we become aware of his presence in ways that we normally fail to recognise. Though all others may desert us in our time of need, the Lord Jesus never will. And he will carry us through it all.

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### **Chapter 10 Trusting God when we do not understand**

In this booklet we have seen a number of reasons why Christians are sometimes called to go through periods of suffering. We have seen how God often uses such times to bless us. For example:

- i. to make us aware of our sinfulness and to correct us;
- ii. to teach us to depend on God more and to pray with greater fervency;
- iii. to make us more aware of God’s presence with us.

ut we must still admit that there are times when we simply do not understand why we are suffering, when it is a mystery to us, and when there is no obvious reason why we are in a particular period of distress. Indeed, it is probably true to say that most Christian believers

experience that on many occasions. It is interesting that when we look in the Bible at Job's suffering, we know why he suffered because the book about him explains that to us, but Job himself was never told why. So this is not an uncommon experience.

This, therefore, raises the very important question, 'How should the follower of the Lord Jesus Christ respond in those instances?'

Well, the thing to do is simply to trust God when we do not understand. As Christians, of course, we know we need to trust God every day, but when we go through trials that are perplexing to us, then we especially need to place our whole situation in the Lord's hands. And there are very good reasons why we need to do this.

#### **a) Because God cares for us**

The loving care of God for his children is revealed throughout the Bible. We read in 1 Peter 5:6-7, "*Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.*"

This is a lovely passage because it tells us of God's deep interest in his children. It really is amazing that God, who is the God of the whole universe, the great Creator of the ends of the earth, is concerned for small, insignificant you and me! And Peter emphasises to us that this is particularly true when we are anxious. Suffering can certainly make us anxious, and not understanding why we are called through certain periods of suffering is something that can increase that anxiety. Peter tells us that at such moments God cares deeply about us and, therefore, we can

and should put our whole lives into his loving hands.

Peter also tells us to humble ourselves under God's mighty hand. By this he is urging us not to resist God proudly, or to kick against him and the adverse circumstances he has brought us into. Instead, he is teaching us to submit to him who knows what is best for us, and to trust him through it. Indeed, the verse before those just quoted, 1 Peter 5:5, says that, "*God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.*" And that is a timely word, for if we do submit our lives humbly to the Lord then he will give us strength to endure and to benefit from the adversity. And he has promised in due time to lift us up.

#### **b) Because God knows all about us**

The Bible teaches us that God knows all things. And there are a number of passages that emphasise this. For example, in Isaiah 46:10 we are told that God knows "*the end from the beginning*". Then you will remember that Jesus asked Peter if he loved him in John 21. Peter replied in verse 17, "*Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.*" And there are many other passages which show us that God has detailed knowledge of everything in the whole universe.

This is so helpful during those times when we do not know why we are suffering, because God does know. He understands fully about our situation. Therefore, we can trust him with real confidence and rest in the fact that he knows all about us. We may not have any idea how things will work out for us, but God knows. And, therefore, we can trust him to guide us and watch over us through it all.

#### **c) Because God is in control of all things**

We have already looked at this in chapter 5, but it is so important that it is worth reminding ourselves of it. Again and again the Bible teaches us that God is sovereign. He is called a great King. He has a throne. He is exalted over all. Related to this, at the end of Ephesians 1, there are some lovely verses about the Lord Jesus Christ which really are encouraging (Ephesians 1:22-23): *“And God placed all things under his (i.e. Jesus’) feet and appointed him to be head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.”*

When that passage tells us the Lord Jesus Christ is ‘over all things’, that means he is in control of everything, and that really does mean everything. This needs to be stressed because it is true, and also because in our thinking we can limit the Lord’s sovereignty to those times when everything is going well. It is quite easy to believe that he is in control then, but it is also true when we are going through adversity. When Ephesians 1 says that Jesus is head over all things, it means exactly that. He is over everyone and everything. He is over Satan, who cannot touch us without his permission. He is over our enemies who want to oppose us as we seek to follow the Lord. He is over every outward circumstance, both the easy ones and the more difficult. It includes every joy and every sorrow. Therefore, we can say he is in control of all that happens to us – every problem we face, every illness, every accident, every bereavement, every time of temptation, every instance of persecution. And so we could go on. There is absolutely nothing that is outside of his control.

This is of tremendous significance and help when we are facing those difficult situations because Ephesians 1 goes on to tell us that the Lord Jesus is *“head over all things for the church, which is his body...”* Take special note of that word ‘for’. Jesus is not in control of everything to be ‘against’ the church, but ‘for’ its benefit. And as each Christian believer belongs to the church, so the Lord Jesus is controlling everything for our benefit. This means we can know with complete assurance that he is using for our profit even those times of suffering which we do not understand. The Lord’s sovereignty is a marvellous source of comfort and strength for the Christian believer to rest on.

I remember hearing a Christian called Josef Ton speaking about this some years ago. Josef Ton is a pastor who has been imprisoned for being a follower of the Lord Jesus. When he came to realise that God is in control of all things it really helped him. One day he was being interrogated by his persecutors and they had made some very harsh threats about what they could do to him. They hoped this would make him give up following the Lord. But he calmly said to them that they could only do what the Lord Jesus wanted them to do to him, and even if they locked him up for a very long time he was sure the Lord must have some purpose for his own good, and if they killed him he would go straight to heaven. His persecutors were amazed at what he said to them, and the fact that he was assured the Lord was in control, even there in the prison, filled his heart with peace and calm. His awareness and acceptance of the sovereignty of God strengthened and helped him.

We, also, can trust God completely with our own lives, knowing with certainty that he is controlling everything.

#### **d) Because God is good and wise**

The Bible teaches us that God is both good and wise. Psalm 100:5 tells us, *“The Lord is good and his love endures for ever.”* And Romans 16:27 tells us that God is *“the only wise God”*. Again, there are many other Bible passages that teach us these two things about God.

Because God is ‘wise’, he never makes a mistake in his dealings with us, and because he is ‘good’, he is never cruel. The importance of this during our times of suffering is quite significant, and has been put in the form of a poem by a Christian believer called Samuel Medley. He lived about 200 years ago and, therefore, the language may sound dated, but what he wrote was amazing.

*“God shall alone the refuge be,  
And comfort of my mind;  
Too wise to be mistaken He,  
Too good to be unkind.*

*In all His holy, sovereign will,  
He is, I daily find,  
Too wise to be mistaken still,  
Too good to be unkind.*

*When sore afflictions on me lie,  
He is (though I am blind)  
Too wise to be mistaken, yea,  
Too good to be unkind.*

*What though I can't His doings see,  
Nor all His footsteps find -*

*Too wise to be mistaken He,  
Too good to be unkind.  
Hereafter He will make me know,  
And I shall surely find,  
He was too wise to err, and oh!  
Too good to be unkind.”*

And Samuel Medley wrote that hymn just after his little child was killed in a tragic accident. Although he could not explain why that should have happened to him, he did know that he could cast himself on the Lord, knowing that for some good reason God had not erred nor been unkind. To trust God like that does take much grace, but at such times there really is nowhere else for us to go, except to cast ourselves on God and his loving mercy, and there is certainly no one better for us to turn to.

#### **e) Conclusion**

When we put all these things together – God cares for us, he knows all things, he is in control, and he is wise and good – the Lord really is a solid foundation for us to rest on. He is a wonderful God and has great mercy and will never forsake his children in their trials. Therefore, when we are perplexed we can trust him completely. He will never fail us.

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