

PERSECUTION AND FIERY TRIALS THE CHRISTIAN'S EXPERIENCE

**"All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution."
– 2 Tim. 3:12.**

GODLINESS IMPLIES a character which is actuated by principles of righteousness. In all our dealings we are either just or unjust, kind or unkind, not according to what some people may think of us, but according to the standard of righteousness found in the Scriptures. Therefore, in order to develop that character which is pleasing to God, we should in every detail of life consider carefully what is right and what is wrong, according to that standard. This course is Scripturally termed meditating in God's Law. When we reach that development of character in which thought, word and deed are measured by the principles of righteousness, we shall have attained godlikeness. – Psa. 119:97.

What the Lord desires to see in His people is not merely an outward manifestation of devotion to Him and to His brethren, but a development of love in our hearts and our dispositions. If we profess to love one another and yet pursue a course of self-seeking, wherein do we manifest love? So St. John admonishes to love not in word only, but in deed and in truth. – I John 3:18.

Primarily, the godly are those who are in Christ Jesus, members of His Mystical Body, having presented their human bodies living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God through the merit of the great Advocate. Secondly, the term godly includes those who live righteously, in sympathy with Christ Jesus, even though they may not live up to the full standard which the Lord has set, because they shrink from the suffering that results from godly living. Thirdly, the term godly includes some in the remote past, who, believing in the promise of the Lord that the "Seed" should some day come, separated

themselves from the rest of the world and, having obtained new aims, new ideas, were out of touch with the remainder of the race because of having a different standard. – Heb. 11:13-16.

The Ancient Worthies composed this third class, who had a share in the suffering of the godly and a participation also in the blessing. Moses, for example, preferred to suffer affliction with the people of God, rather than to participate in the honors of the Egyptian Government. Although adopted into the family of Pharaoh, he had **[R5117 : page 323]** respect to the promise that the Messiah would come. Hence he suffered on account of his faith in the promise. So all the patriarchs desired to be in harmony with God, in accordance with His promise made to Abraham, and because of belief in that promise they suffered more or less persecution. – Heb. 11:24-26;36-38.

Some one may ask, "Why should the godly suffer?" The Bible answers that sin has brought the world into opposition to God. Whoever, then, would have all men speak in commendation of him would not be in harmony with the Divine arrangement, for the masses of the world are pursuing a course that the Lord does not approve. We are not saying that everything which the world does is sinful, but that the standards of God are so high that because of their fallen condition the masses of the world are not subject to the Law of God, neither, indeed, can they be, for they are carnal, sold under sin. (Rom. 8:7; 7:14,15.) Those who wish to have influence with the world must cater to popular prejudices. On the contrary, those who would be God's people must be loyal to the principles of righteousness and consequently must go in the opposite direction to that of the world. Hence they are opposed by the world.

From the standpoint of God the course of the world is sinful. There is a tendency in our flesh to go with the world, who are laboring under false views of various kinds, because that course is in sympathy with the desires of our own fallen flesh. Hence to live godly is to live in opposition to the course of the world and of our own flesh. This

would include not only living uprightly and avoiding sin, etc., but also the making of sacrifices as well, where principles are not involved. We are to beware, however, lest we be deceived along this line. Not only are we contending with the world, but we are wrestling with wicked spirits in high positions. – Eph. 6:12.

ILLUSTRATION OF SATAN'S DEVICES

Sometimes Satan's arts seem to be employed to get those who are trying to live godly into contention with each other. One of his devices is to make unimportant things seem important, and in this way to make people think that they are contending for righteousness' sake, and that the sufferings that they bring on themselves in this manner are for righteousness' sake. Another device is to deceive people into "busy-bodying in other men's [R5117 : page 324] matters." (I Peter 4:15.) It behooves us, therefore, as the Lord's people, not to try to straighten out all the affairs of the Church or of the world, and not to get into conflict with the brethren. They, like ourselves, are laboring to counteract the influences of the world, the flesh and the Devil.

Our influence upon each other should be uplifting; we should not cause others to grieve, except where suffering is absolutely necessary. Hence the Lord's people should cultivate the fruits of the Spirit increasingly – meekness, gentleness, patience, brotherly kindness, love. The cultivation of these fruits of the Spirit is a law in respect to the Lord's people. All who would live godly in Christ Jesus are to see to it that they are not the *cause* of *suffering* to others – especially to those of the household of faith.

SUFFERING AS A CHRISTIAN

While it is true that all who will live godly in this world will suffer to the extent to which they are out of harmony with the present evil conditions, yet the promised blessings of the Scriptures are to those who live godly *in Christ Jesus*, those who are *Christians*. Of these St.

Peter says, "If any man suffer *as a Christian*, let him not be ashamed."
– I Peter 4:16.

A Christian is a follower of Christ, one who has cast in his lot to suffer with Christ, that He may be also glorified with the Lord. (2 Tim. 2:12.) From the Apostle's standpoint, therefore, no one could *suffer* as a Christian unless he had become a Christian.

Every painful experience which our Lord had was suffering for righteousness' sake – not only the great sufferings, not only the great fight against sin, but also all the little, unpleasant experiences common to the world. Being "holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners" (Heb. 7:26), there was no reason why He should suffer. We do not understand that the Heavenly Father has provided sufferings, trials and difficulties for the angels who are in harmony with Him. Nor do we think that Jesus, being a Son in full accord with the Father, would have suffered were it not for His Covenant of self-sacrifice. All of His sufferings were because He had come into the world to be man's Redeemer. They were all parts of His necessary experience.

The sufferings which our Lord endured were the result of His activity in the service of the Father. These were His weariness, His weakness after giving out His vitality to heal others, His bloody sweat, His ignominious buffetings, and all the reproaches, the sneers and the bitter words incurred on account of His faithfulness, to all of which He meekly and quietly submitted until His sufferings on Calvary terminated His human existence.

SUFFERINGS RESULTING FROM HEREDITY, NOT SUFFERINGS OF CHRIST

There is no question that suffering in general is not suffering with Christ, but with Adam. Our physical infirmities which are of heredity, are not sufferings of Christ. Rather we should speak of the sufferings of Christ as being *voluntary* and not involuntary. When the Apostle says that if we suffer with the Lord we shall also reign with Him

(2 Tim. 2:12), he means the suffering which we bring on ourselves through faithfulness to our Covenant. St. Paul speaks of filling up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ for His Body's sake, which is the Church. (Col. 1:24.) These experiences are not for Adam's sake.

In St. Paul's own case he had, we believe, weak eyes as a result of his wrong course in persecuting the Church; and that wrong course was, no doubt, largely the result of heredity. When the Apostle speaks of the sufferings he endured on account of his eyes, he does not speak of them as the sufferings of Christ, but says that his affliction was a messenger of *Satan* to buffet him. (2 Cor. 12:7.) We might then say that all physical sufferings resulting from heredity are ministers of Satan opposing us, causing us much difficulty. However, we believe that the Lord is pleased with us if we resist these ministers of Satan.

If we should think of all our physical pains and aches as sufferings for Christ, then we should be obliged to think of our mental defects also as sufferings for Christ. For instance, a man who had a disabled hand might have a comparatively even temper; another might have a perverse temper, leading him into trouble, leading him to busybody in other men's matters, etc. Thus his disposition causes him to suffer as a *busybody* and not for Christ. St. Paul tells us that our defects in character are works of the fallen flesh. (Gal. 5:19-21.) If the sufferings that come to us because of imperfect mental conditions are sufferings of heredity, the physical sufferings which result from imperfect physical conditions, cannot be counted as sufferings for Christ.

In the case of a Christian, inherited weaknesses and those brought upon himself by the violation of the laws of God previous to his entrance into the family of God as a son, while not sufferings with Christ, will be made advantageous to him. These weaknesses our Father sees fit to leave with us, but assures us that His grace will be sufficient for us. (2 Cor. 12:9.) While the realization of such care for our interests is humiliating in that it forces conviction of our weakness,

yet it is refreshing and inspiring in that it proves our Father's love for us. "The Father Himself loveth you." – John 16:27.

SUFFERING TURNED TO THE ADVANTAGE OF THE NEW CREATURE

But when one has undertaken to follow in the footsteps of Christ and has been begotten as a New Creature, whatever affliction that *New Creature* undergoes because of following the Lord, is suffering as a Christian; and whatever our experiences in suffering may be, these are not necessarily the portion of the sons of God, for the angels do not suffer; but He permits the Church to have them in order to develop and crystallize character. If we rejoice that we are found worthy to share in the sufferings of the present time, every trial will be turned to advantage as a part of our Christian experience. "They are not of the world." (John 17:16.) Therefore all of our experiences must be regarded as Christian, for correction in righteousness and for educational purposes.

But this is taking a broader, deeper view than ordinary. Certainly a Christian is not to be ashamed of what he may suffer because of his loyalty to the Lord, to the Truth and to the brethren. In these sufferings he is to glorify God and to be thankful for them. He is to be glad for the opportunity of enduring something, to show not only the Lord, but himself also that he has endured something for Christ's sake. Every sacrifice that we make is for the purpose of suffering as a Christian, and we are not to be ashamed so to suffer. – I Peter 4:16.

SUFFERING FOR CONSCIENCE NOT ALWAYS SUFFERING FOR CHRIST

There are others who suffer more or less as Christians suffer, but they are suffering from a worldly standpoint. People sometimes say, "This worldly man has his trials and sufferings, and shows such patience, such resignation, that surely he is suffering as a Christian." But we do not **[R5118 : page 325]** understand that anyone can suffer

as a Christian unless he takes the steps necessary to make him a Christian. We are to view matters from God's standpoint. Doubtless many have suffered as Christians from a human viewpoint who were not Christians. In the Dark Ages many were put to death for the sake of principle. In our own day there are people who give no evidence of being Christians, but who would rather die than have the Bible taken out of the public schools. Although they do not understand the Bible, yet if these were times of persecution, many would die at the stake in order to keep the Bible in the public schools.

We cannot always tell whether suffering is for Christ's sake. But where people have suffered for conscience' sake, they have thus cultivated character, and will get a blessing in the next Age for that suffering. At present there is only the one door into membership in the Body of Christ – obedience even unto death. Suffering with Christ, as we have seen, is not the ordinary suffering common to all in the fallen state, but only such experiences as are the result, more directly, of following Christ's example in advocating unpopular truths and in exposing popular errors. Such were the causes of the sufferings of Christ; and such will be the causes of suffering, persecution and loss to all who follow in His footsteps. Such will have fellowship in His sufferings now, and in the end will be counted worthy to share in the reward given for faithfulness to principle.

Throughout the Gospel Age this course has meant self-sacrificing labor and endurance of reproach in the sowing and watering of Christ's doctrines. Now, in the end of the Age, it means a similar fidelity and endurance in the Harvest work now in progress – faithfulness even to the laying down of life itself, whether it be required by the gradual process of working it out in the Master's service, a dying daily, or by being brought more abruptly to a martyr's death.

SHRINKING BACK FROM SUFFERING

Our Lord forewarns us that in the end of the Gospel Age, many who have a love for Christ will allow their love to grow cold because

of the iniquity and sin in the world. (Matt. 24:12.) It will be a test for such to decide whether they will follow the Lord in self-sacrifice as His disciples or whether they will partake of the worldly spirit. We see this test in operation now. A great many people who name the name of Christ, who really love the Lord, who appreciate much of His character, who would like to see the right prosper, nevertheless have no thought of making a spectacle of themselves before men. They would like to do right, to walk honorably, and to have the favor of men as good citizens. But as to being warm and faithful followers of the Lord – *through "evil report and good report"* (2 Cor. 6:8) – their faith and zeal are not sufficient to endure the test.

The Lord Jesus gives us the invitation to become joint-heirs with Him. He has very clearly informed us that to follow in His steps will mean trials and difficulties in the flesh. He says, "In the world ye shall have tribulation." (John 16:33.) St. Paul repeats the sentiment, saying, "We must through much tribulation enter into the Kingdom of God"; and again in our text he emphasizes the thought, saying, "Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus *shall suffer persecution.*" (Acts 14:22; 2 Tim. 3:12.) There is no other way to enter the Kingdom than by self-sacrifice, deadening of the flesh, mortifying it. In proportion as the New Creature grows, the old creature perishes, until the sacrifice shall have been completed in death.

The Lord's people should thoroughly understand the terms and conditions upon which they have been called. They should therefore not think it strange when trials come upon them, no matter how fiery, no matter how severe. The Apostle Peter lovingly counsels the Church: "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some *strange* thing happened unto you; but rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that when His glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy. If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you; on *their* part He is evil spoken of, but on *your* part He is *glorified.*" (1 Peter 4:12-14.) The Lord is to

be not only the Instructor, but also the Refiner to purge out the dross, that we may be made ready to share with Christ in the Kingdom of "glory, honor and immortality." – Rom. 2:7.

TRIALS FROM FALSE BRETHREN

The Scriptures plainly teach that special trials may be expected in the Church, amongst the brethren. And we find it to be true that our severest trials come not from without, but, as the Apostle in substance says, "From among yourselves shall arise false brethren," to injure the flock in general through personal ambition. (Acts 20:30.) This becomes a test not only to the Church, but to all those who are in contact with us, for if one member suffer, all the members suffer with it. – I Cor. 12:26.

We are not, therefore, to think it strange if there are trials and difficulties, and if more or less dispute arise in the Church. We are to cultivate gentleness, meekness, patience, loving-kindness toward all. Nevertheless, if a dispute arise amongst the Lord's people, we are to recognize that such things are unavoidable amongst those who have the Truth. Our heads are imperfect, and consequently it requires some time to come into line with the teachings of the Lord's Word. Even disputation makes life an activity, and is better than a dead condition – not to care what is spoken or not spoken. Nevertheless, those who have zeal should be careful that they manifest the Spirit of the Lord, as above indicated – gentleness, patience, meekness, brotherly kindness, love, humility.

Think it not strange that there are fiery trials *amongst yourselves*, arising from one cause or another, that will make it particularly severe for you. Those among whom you are thrown in contact will cause you suffering, because of your zeal and their misunderstanding, their imperfection, etc. Similarly, you may be a cause of trial to others. All of these fiery trials will work out good for you. It is far better to be amongst those who are fervent in spirit than to take a place amongst those who are lukewarm and thus lose the privilege of being one of

those who are footstep followers of Christ. Perhaps those who are lukewarm will, in the Time of Trouble, learn a lesson. But the Little Flock are to learn their lesson in the present time – allowing the experiences of life to work out for them a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory. – 2 Cor. 4:17.

Our knowledge of God is limited; yet it is only what we should expect of the Heavenly Father, that any whom He accepts as His children will have Divine love and care in the supervision of their affairs, which will make all things work for good to them. Since the Lord is our Shepherd, no one is able to pluck us out of His hands. (John 10:28,29.) We are as dear to Him as the apple of His eye. He that began a good work in us is able to complete it in the day of Jesus Christ. (Phil. 1:6.) So the more faith we have the more we appreciate **[R5118 : page 326]** the text, "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them that are the called according to His purpose." (Rom. 8:28.) This includes even the things that seem to be very contrary, very evil, very disadvantageous.

Our Lord said, "And this is life eternal, that they might know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou has sent." (John 17:3.) To know the Father means to be in fellowship with Him, to have an intimate acquaintance with Him. Experience corroborates this fact. The more obedient we are as children the more intimate is our acquaintance with Him. And if we are unfaithful, even for a little space, we shall fail to make development along spiritual lines. But in proportion as we are seeking to walk in His ways, we become intimate with Him in the particular sense in which a child knows his father. This knowledge gives us the trust that He cares for us as His children, and makes all things work together for good to us. – Rom. 8:28; I John 1:6,7.

CO-OPERATION WITH GOD TO THE BEST OF OUR ABILITY

We note, however, that St. Paul says that all things work together for *good*, not for *best*. God has something to do in the way of His choice of His reward and of our possibilities. The angels of God, however obedient to Him, could not become archangels nor cherubim. Their obedience brings their highest welfare on their own plane. So with us. We cannot get the best for the reason that He has already given it to Jesus Christ, whom He has set next to Himself at His right hand in power and glory and honor. – I Peter 3:22.

Again, this promise is not a guarantee that all things in life will work together for the very best to us as though we had neither will nor choice in the matter. We should not say, "I positively resign myself; the Lord has said that all things will work together for the best, and if I miss opportunities in the service I shall say, 'Oh, well, it is all for the best.'" Thus to think would be a mistake, for it is evidently not at all the thought.

After we have become New Creatures in Christ and children of God, He leaves us with a certain amount of choice. It is very largely in our own control what we shall do, whether we shall make progress or stand still or go backward. We cannot say that if one had lost the High Calling his experiences would be the very best possible; and that if he went into the Second Death, his fate was the best. But we can say that this Scripture means that God stands ready to give us the best that He may have under the terms and conditions of the Covenant which He has made with us.

Ours is a Covenant of sacrifice. There are certain laws and principles which are not to be broken. Along these lines the Lord Jesus tells us that the Father will appoint those next to the Lord who have demonstrated most of the Spirit of the Redeemer. He will not put anyone in such a position or into the Kingdom arbitrarily. His Character, His Words, stand pledged that He will **[R5119 : page**

326] make the best of us that He is able to do, while at the same time recognizing our wills as paramount.

Jehovah does not seek those as His children who need to be forced. Our Lord said that the Father seeketh such to worship Him as worship Him in spirit and in truth. (John 4:23.) We are to work to the best of our ability. But with all of our stumbling the Lord stands pledged that He will not leave us if we are faithful, and that He will make even our stumbling work out for good to us. Those who lose the crown may come up through great tribulation with the Great Company class. This is the best thing possible for them under the Divine arrangement. For those who go into the Second Death, their fate will not be the best for *them*; but it will be best for the entire universe that those should be blotted out of existence who are out of harmony with righteousness.

