



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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SUFFERING

Suffering is part of human life as we know it. It comes to everyone at one time or another. Sickness, the death of a close friend or relative, poverty, humiliation, being a victim of crime or natural disaster, the near approach of death -- whatever the cause, suffering is the common lot of man. It comes to Christians and nonchristians alike. How do we deal with it?

When suffering strikes, we are tempted to react, "Why me? What have I done? How can God do this to me? Don't I say my prayers and go to Church? I've tried to live a faithful Christian life. Why is this happening to me?" This is the reaction of the natural man within us. Implicitly, such a reaction means that we think God owes us a life without suffering in return for all the prayers and good works we have done. After all, if Christian life will not deliver us from suffering, what good is it? Worse, this approach to suffering implies that we should be able to do something about it. "What have I done?" means "What can I change about my life that will deliver me from this suffering?"

This approach is one of control. We try to control the situation which has produced the suffering. If it is illness, we try to effect a cure by technical (usually medical) means. The spiritual side we try to control by figuring out what it is that we are doing wrong so we can change it. We think that God must be mad at us, and if we can just find out why, we will change and so be delivered from our affliction.

There are practical problems with this approach, of course. There may not be a medical cure for the illness. We may be unable to control the suffering. And on the spiritual level we will probably not be able to figure out what it is that God wants us to do: there are so many things we could change in our lives. This approach to suffering is bound to lead to bitterness of spirit. We will come to resent the illness over which we have no control. We will hate it, not only for the

pain it inflicts, but because it makes us feel impotent, unable to control our own destiny. We will be humiliated by it. Our suffering will be doubled: we suffer from the disease, and also from the pain of our helplessness before it.

There is, of course, another way of dealing with suffering: the distinctively Christian way. This takes its cue from our Lord, who Himself suffered on our behalf. We learn from Him that suffering, though painful, can be redemptive. (We learn this, at least, if we do not believe that His suffering was a total waste.) Suffering, though evil, is not the greatest evil. It needs to be understood not as a completely worldly event, but as an event in our spiritual lives. The question is what we will make of it in the context of our relationship with God.

There are two kinds of suffering: deserved and undeserved. When we think of suffering, we usually think of the latter. But there will be times when our suffering is the direct result of our sin: we shoot another person, the prison term is to be expected. Sin is a violation of the order of creation, and suffering is bound to result from such a violation.

There is also much suffering which is not explicitly earned by some particular action. Even were we perfect and without sin, we would still have suffering -- at least, it seems that way from Jesus' experience. This suffering includes illness and pain, but also more trivial trials: having to go about our daily tasks even when we are tired, not being able to afford everything we would like to have, having an unsupportive boss at work. We need to admit that we suffer in many and various ways, so that we can learn to bear our suffering as Christians.

First, suffering is a sign that we are in fact living as Christians. Christ suffered. If we live as He lived, we, too, will suffer. Clearly His suffering was not the result of His doing anything wrong. Nor should we necessarily assume that ours is. Were there never any suffering in our lives, we would have to wonder if we really were living Christian lives, since our lives would be so different from Christ's. We do not go seeking suffering, of course. But we must be ready to deal with it when it comes our way.

Saint Peter tells us that we should expect suffering: it is not as if something strange is happening to us, but rather the common lot of those who bear Christ's name. (See I Peter 5:12f.) Suffering comes our way to try our faith as gold is tried in the fire. (I Peter 1:7) This means first of all that our faith is purified by suffering. It is made perfect. Suffering burns out the imperfections in our faith. The imperfections are what make us tempted to rely on ourselves in adversity instead of upon God. They lead us to greater self-centeredness and a grasping control on our lives, when

we should be fleeing to God for His help. Thus, properly used, suffering will draw us into closer dependence upon God -- our helplessness leads not to bitterness but to intimate dependence. When we are helpless, we can either rail against it, or we can abandon ourselves to the One who can support us when we cannot support ourselves.

Fire tries the gold in another way as well. It is the assayer's means for showing how pure the gold is. When we suffer, we have an opportunity for discerning how we are doing as Christians. Our willingness to flee to God shows the fruit (or lack thereof) of our Christian lives to date. And if we are found lacking, the opportunity is at hand for improvement.

Suffering thus gives us the opportunity to grow strong as Christians. You have seen this if you have ever watched a proficient Christian die: full of trust and love for the Lord, utterly devoid of bitterness even in the midst of pain. This Christian strength does not come in a moment. No one can show such strength who has not spent a good part of his life in Christian discipline. Or perhaps, it is the fruit of the Christian use of suffering.

Suffering is an opportunity for us to die to self in order to live to God. We know that this is part and parcel of Christian discipline. Most of the time we have to try to do this on our own initiative: making what we can of our opportunities. We try to do what is right and to maintain our prayer life whether we really feel like it or not. With suffering, however, we have an involuntary opportunity to give ourselves to God. Since we have not chosen to suffer, it cannot be an occasion of self-assertion, as, say, fasting might be. We have only to give ourselves to God in the midst of the pain. This will be a death to self: to the self that wants to control everything. It will be a living to God, who can give life even in the midst of suffering.

Moreover, we can understand suffering as a form of discipline. It is for our good, perfecting our faith, in order that we may grow up into the full stature of Christ. It is an assurance that we are loved by God, for it shows us that he cares enough about us to discipline us. Our experience as parents (and as children!) makes it clear that it often takes more effort to discipline a child than to let the error or misdeed go. So when God takes the time to correct us, it is a sign that He is treating us as His children. Even though the discipline is unpleasant at the time, we can nevertheless take comfort that it gives an assurance of our sonship. (See Hebrews 12.)

In all of our suffering, we need to keep in mind where we are bound. This is not easy. In the midst of pain, we are inclined to keep our vision on the pain. It seems impossible to raise our eyes from that. We are the most earth-bound of creatures. Nevertheless we must not give in to that urge. We must (by force of will if nec-

essary) raise our eyes to the glory that is in store for us. Our true home is in heaven, in the fulness of the Presence of God.

Our present condition is indeed transitory; it will not last forever. How often in worldly situations we are willing to endure pain or discomfort for a time because we know it will only last an hour or a day or even a week. We accept the pain of surgery because we know it will be followed in a few weeks by the blessedness of health. Then, if we keep our eyes on the health that is to come, we can better endure the pain that is at hand.

The same attitude will help us, if we really believe that we are bound for heaven. All of this transitory life is pain and grief compared with the life which is to be revealed. We must get used to thinking of ourselves as citizens of heaven. Then we will be able to persevere in time of suffering, and to make good use of the spiritual opportunities it affords.

We do not look forward to the joys of heaven as some sort of compensation for our present suffering. It is not a bribe which God offers us in order to get us to go along with suffering now. Rather, we give ourselves over to our present situation, entrusting ourselves to His mercy, secure in the knowledge that as we strive to live in Him now, our desire will be finally satisfied on the other side of the grave. We love Him now: we look forward to the day when He will be utterly present to our love.

Suffering is in any event transitory. The glory is permanent. In its most difficult case, suffering leads to (or at least in the direction of) death. Then we have even more interest in suffering as Christians. For in suffering as Christians we abandon ourselves to God's care. We put ourselves in His hands. We allow Him to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. This is exactly the preparation we need for dying. When we reach the moment of death, we will no longer be able to do anything for ourselves. Then we will have to lie back and allow God to take over. The only alternative is to go to our grave cursing our birth -- and probably God along with it. We can die in bitterness, or we can die as Christians. Christian death requires the same approach as Christian suffering: basking in God's love, and allowing it to support us in our need. It takes our need as an occasion to draw near to God, to depend upon Him, to live as His adopted, faithful (sometimes prodigal, no doubt) sons. We must give up our control, and allow Him to take over. Then we will learn in the depths of our being what it means to be the children of God.

