

THE AGONY & THE ECSTASY

By: Keith R. Keyser

Why do bad things happen to good people? Or more specifically, why do Christians suffer? Humans live in a world of suffering, plagued by disease, loneliness, and pain of every imaginable sort. The question, “Why is there suffering?” is not limited to philosophers and ethicists—every thinking person ponders it! Even if one arrives at the answer “Because there is sin in the world,” that only leads to a further line of questioning. For instance, one might ask: “How did this evil come to exist in the Universe? Did God fashion it this way?” The Bible leaves no doubt that the cosmos was not always as we see it now. Upon completing the Creation, God pronounced it “good.” (“Very good” described His assessment of His handiwork after the formation of Man.) Sin, which at root is rebellion against God, began in the Heavens. It did not emanate from God, but rather from Lucifer and numerous angelic beings. A thoughtful person might then pose the question: “If evil originated in heavenly places, how was it transferred to this planet?” Once more the Bible provides the answer: “Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and thus death passed upon all men, because all have sinned.”(Rom.5:12) Generally speaking, we may thereby explain the existence of evil in the world. While this explanation is helpful regarding the general aspects of sin, it still does not answer our first interrogative.

It is impossible for any finite being to accurately account for every single bad situation that occurs in someone’s life. That is to say, I cannot necessarily tell you *specifically* why God has allowed something bad to happen to you at a given point in time. Some things one will not know on this side of Eternity. Armed with the Scriptures, however, one may draw some conclusions about God and His dealings with His Creation that can help account for the calamities that befall His children.

For a correct understanding of this subject, one must first see that suffering is a necessary part of the Christian life. Both the Lord Jesus and His apostles affirmed that those who believe the Gospel are not exempt from the trials and vicissitudes of life in a fallen world. In fact, the Scripture directly says “Yea, and all who will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.”(2 Tim.3:12) The Lord Jesus Himself said “In the world ye shall have tribulation.” These and other verses promise us that Christian living will inevitably bring us into difficulties in the service of Christ. Frankly, the Lord Jesus indicated the harsh nature of discipleship in these words: “If anyone desires to follow me, let him take up *his cross* daily and follow me.” Suffering is an integral part of God’s perfect plan for the Christian. Therefore, it should surprise no one that the Lord’s people experience ordinary and extraordinary afflictions.

If trials are an inseparable component of the Christian life, one might then wonder what specific purposes God has in allowing difficulties in the lives of His children. **James** 1:3-4 provide one answer: “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.”(NKJV) The Lord sovereignly uses painful circumstances to produce patience in believers. Trials bring people to an end of themselves. This passage reveals that God employs these troubles to bring Christians to complete dependence on Himself. In the context of the first-century world of **James 1**, the Christians were facing staunch persecution, involving the loss of

family, fortune, and freedom. The saints are offered Divine wisdom to cope with these gargantuan problems, thus bringing them into more intimate fellowship with their Father in Heaven.(Jms.1:5) Distractions in the material world are legion; consequently, God allows drastic conditions to occur in order to teach saints His perfect wisdom and grace. Like the believers who received James' epistle, the suffering recipients of the epistle to the **Hebrews** were assured of the faithfulness of the Great High Priest "...[who] ever liveth to make intercession for them."(Heb.7:25b) Such truths still bolster the confidence of God's people during hard times.

Trials divulge the true quality of the world. All carefully crafted facades are stripped of any vestige of credibility. Vexing times show things as they really are, in stark detail. Nevertheless, the manifesting nature of trials is not strictly negative in character. The genuineness of faith is powerfully revealed by trials. During times of prosperity it is relatively easy to profess to be a Christian. When troubles come, however, many false professors abandon their affirmation of faith in the Lord in favor of an easier path. Just as physical trauma demonstrates weak points in a bridge, likewise spiritual stress brings out faith that is false and shallow. True faith is verified in the crucible of suffering.

Historically, some of the Church's leanest spiritual seasons have occurred during times of material prosperity and safety. It is human nature to become complacent when things are going well. Therefore, God frequently employs hard times to wean our hearts away from the world and onto Himself. The pulse of the Christian grows quicker as he remembers that this world is not his home. Whereas this world is a scene of sin and woe, heaven is a place of joyful, uninterrupted fellowship with the Creator. Trials also remind the believer to be thankful for *all* of the Lord's mercies toward him.

There is definitely an empathetic element that comes out of suffering. By passing through trials, the believer is enabled to fulfil the task of bearing one another's burdens in a more realistic fashion. If one had never suffered what Shakespeare termed "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," then one could not adequately comfort another suffering person. Think of the comfort that must have come to the believers who received the epistles of Peter, knowing that the author had himself endured public humiliation, physical beatings, and imprisonment for the sake of the Gospel. Likewise, Paul's readers knew that he understood what it was like to undergo shipwreck, beatings, imprisonment, and the loss of property, reputation, family, & friends. To the Corinthians he gave a painful wound report, and topped it off with an interesting but little thought of aspect of his trials: "Besides those things that are without, the crowd of cares pressing on me daily, the burden of all the assemblies."(2 Cor.11:28, JND.) The spiritual growth and needs of the believers weighed upon the veteran apostle's mind. Each doctrinal controversy, schism, and public sin of the assemblies caused him concern, which resulted in time on his knees in prayer. Modern Christians need to remember that our elders and fulltime workers are involved in a spiritual battle that involves them in the affairs surrounding our well being. Consequently, we need to earnestly pray for them, & respect them for the work's sake. Generally speaking, as Christians suffer, we are better equipped to appreciate one another, and pray for suffering saints.

God's Word further assures us that enduring persecution for the Lord's sake will inevitably lead to Divine blessing. The assembly in Smyrna was warned that a time of testing was coming; nevertheless, they were assured that it would result in their ultimate reward. The Holy Spirit phrased it thus: "I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty

(but thou art rich)...Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the Devil will cast some of you into prison, that you may be tried; and you shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.”(Rev.2:9-10.) Faithful endurance of suffering for the will of the Master will always enjoy heavenly recompense.

It is clear that God is greatly concerned about the trials that come upon His people. He is not indifferent to our problems and woes. Christians have the assurance of Scripture, however, that “All works work together for good, to them that love God and are the called according to His purpose.”(Rom.8:28.) As William MacDonald once said: “Nothing that comes to the child of God gets through without first passing through a filter of infinite love.” Suffering is the soil that helps cultivate the growth of the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. Times of difficulty make us dependent on God, and help us to care more for our brothers and sisters in Christ. Above all, it is comforting to remember the words of the Psalmist: “For His anger is but for a moment; His favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy cometh in the morning.”(Ps.30:5, ASV.) A day is coming when the glorious promise of the Lord will be fulfilled: “And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.”(Rev.21:4.) As John Nelson Darby once expressed it in a hymn: “In the desert God will teach thee/What the God that thou hast found/Patient, gracious, powerful, holy/All His grace shall there abound. On to Canaan’s rest still wending/Even thy wants and woes shall bring/Suited grace from high descending/Thou shalt taste of mercy’s spring. Though thy way be long and dreary/Eagle strength He’ll still renew/Garments fresh and foot unwearied/Tell how God hath brought thee through.”¹ Even so come Lord Jesus!

¹ #76 in *Hymns for the Little Flock*.