

ChristReformationChurch

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When is Suffering God's Will for Us?

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Scripture Reading: Job 1-2

Introduction

This morning I would like to take some time to correct some very wrong thinking that many Christians have. Specifically, I would like to answer this question: **“When is it God's will for me to suffer?”**

Or, more specifically, **“When is it NOT God's will for me to suffer?”**

It is vital for us to get the answers to these questions right, because Christians are in very great need of having a clear, accurate, biblical theology of suffering. Much harm has been and continue to be done to people because of very bad teaching and beliefs in this area.

- A church in Clackamas county, Oregon has repeatedly taught its people that Christians must not seek medical attention for themselves or their children. As a result, numbers of children have died. Several parents have been, rightly, prosecuted for not taking their critically ill children to the doctor.
- People in very terrible and abusive situations are often told that it is God's will for them to patiently remain in and endure the abuse.
- Some Christians seem to believe that staying in suffering, when they could get out of it, is somehow meritorious before God and that believers who stay in an abusive or harmful scenario are more pious and holy than others.
- Other Christians maintain that it is wrong to defend ourselves against violence or maliciousness, pressing others to silently endure maltreatment.
- Still others, like Job's friends, insist that when suffering comes to us it is, more often than not, God

punishing us for something we have done.

- Scriptures are often mis-quoted and mis-applied to support these notions.

These things are terribly damaging, entirely wrong, and we must be absolutely clear in our thinking about them.

Here is the thesis that I want to teach to you this morning, and I am confident that it is God's truth:

“When God Himself puts us into a place of suffering, as He did Job, then it is for our good and for His glory. In those situations there is no “way out” until the Lord chooses to provide it. These are the times of suffering which we patiently endure.

But when suffering comes, we always have every right to use whatever means are available to us to stop it. While the Lord uses suffering in our lives and the lives of other believers for our good, it is always right to seek to end that suffering. Patient endurance of trials does not preclude us from seeking an end to that trial.”

There are many Christians right at this moment who are suffering unnecessarily simply because they have been taught that because God uses suffering in our lives, we must never try to escape it. Such horribly

wrong thinking simply enables evil to do its wickedness to us unmolested.

Let's consider the case of Job then. What do we see here in these first two chapters?

Job 1:1-6 There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job, and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. (2) There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. (3) He possessed 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, and 500 female donkeys, and very many servants, so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east. (4) His sons used to go and hold a feast in the house of each one on his day, and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. (5) And when the days of the feast had run their course, Job would send and consecrate them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all. For Job said, “It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts.” Thus Job did continually. (6) Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them.

1. Job was “blameless and upright.” Therefore we know that whatever was about to befall him, it was not

because of something in him or something that he had done. It was not punishment from God. Job feared God and in fact, “turned away from evil.”

2. God was greatly glorified by Job’s obedience to Him, thus leading to Satan’s premise that Job was only doing it because he knew God would make him rich.
3. To disprove Satan’s allegation, the Lord permitted the devil to take everything away from Job. It didn’t work. And neither did it work when God permitted Satan to strike Job’s own body.

Essentially, Job’s three friends were preachers of the health, wealth and prosperity gospel which said that when bad things like this happen, it is the hand of God punishing us for our sins and when He blesses us with good stuff it is a reward for our good deeds! That simple. And by the way, in the end, God announces how much He hates that “gospel” —

Job 42:7-9 After the LORD had spoken these words to Job, the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite: “My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. (8) Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and offer up a burnt

offering for yourselves. And my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly. For you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.” (9) So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went and did what the LORD had told them, and the LORD accepted Job’s prayer.

Now it is plain then that Job’s suffering was decreed by the Lord. And that as Job was in that suffering, there was no way of escape. Nothing he could do about it except trust the Lord. [NOTE: We should be warned here that at least 75% of our “friends” will advise us badly in these times!!].

When it was the Lord’s time, He brought an end to Job’s suffering. Job benefitted from it and the Lord was glorified (though remember, the Lord NEVER told Job about Satan and the whole reason why the Lord had brought this trial to Job).

Does this mean then that every time a trial enters our lives, we are to endure it without seeking to escape it or bring it to an end? No! And I will show you another example to prove it:

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to

harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. (8) Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. (9) But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. (10) For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Here once more we have a case in which the Lord determined to bring a trial into the life of one of His own – in this case, the Apostle Paul. It was intended to keep Paul from becoming conceited over the heavenly visions he had been shown. As in Job’s case, this thorn (whatever it was) is said to be “a messenger of Satan.”

But notice the Apostle’s response. He pleaded (that’s a strong word) three times that the Lord would remove this thorn. Was Paul sinning in doing so? Obviously not. Was there anything else Paul could do to end this suffering? No. Had Paul done anything wrong to deserve this thorn? No. If there had been a way of escape from it, would Paul have taken it? His prayers answer that question – YES!

Paul speaks of a similar situation in 1 Corinthians 1 –

2 Corinthians 1:3-10 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, (4) who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. **(5) For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.**(6) If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. (7) Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort. (8) For we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. (9) Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. **But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.** (10) **He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again.**

You see then that in this trial, no doubt one of persecution for the gospel, God was using it for good. The Apostle had no choice in it. There was no escape until the Lord effected deliverance from it.

Now, the reason I highlighted verse 5 is because it is an example of Scripture that is often used to wrongly keep Christians in an evil situation when in fact there is a way of escape and they should take it. The thinking goes like this –

“Our sufferings are to be like Christ’s sufferings. As Christ was obedient to the point of death on a cross (Php 2), so we must be as well. As He was a Lamb led to slaughter and did not open His mouth, so it is to be with us.”

And yet we see from the Lord Jesus’ own earthly life and ministry that there were times that He escaped from suffering. When He actually prayed for that escape (ie, the Garden of Gethsemane). Here is an example:

John 2:24-25 But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people (25) and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

Luke 4:29-30 And they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought

him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff. (30) But passing through their midst, he went away.

John 8:59 So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

John 10:39 Again they sought to arrest him, but he escaped from their hands.

John 11:53-54 So from that day on they made plans to put him to death. (54) Jesus therefore no longer walked openly among the Jews, but went from there to the region near the wilderness, to a town called Ephraim, and there he stayed with the disciples.

That is more than enough evidence to prove that Jesus Himself did not always submit to persecution and in fact very often took the means of escape.

When Jesus did allow Himself to be arrested and crucified, it was because it was for this reason that He came. He came to save us by His redemption on the cross. And Christians go wrong when they equate our suffering with this aspect of Jesus’ suffering. WE do not suffer for redemption of sin. Jesus’ death was radically different in this regard. There is no redemption, no redeeming, healthy, life-giving purpose in:

- A woman (or man) remaining in suffering in an abusive marriage,
- A person suffering from disease not going to the doctor,
- Thinking that we are never allowed to draw boundaries with people who are not safe to have relationships with,
- Submit without question to those in authority over us,
- Never defend ourselves,
- Never take someone to court who has wronged us

When Jesus was falsely accused by the Pharisees, He was anything but quiet!

John 8:37-46 I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. (38) I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father.” (39) They answered him, “Abraham is our father.” Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, (40) but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. (41) You are doing the works your father did.” They said to him, “We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father—even God.” (42) Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own

accord, but he sent me. (43) Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. (44) You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. (45) But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. (46) Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me?

On the cross, at His arrest and subsequent sufferings, Jesus submitted, yielded, did not try to escape, and remained quiet. He did not defend Himself. But our sufferings at the hands of evil men are not redemptive in the sense that the cross was. There is a difference.

Some people have pointed to Philippians 2 as justification for teaching that a Christian is never to try to escape suffering:

Philippians 2:1-8 So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, (2) complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. (3) Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in

humility count others more significant than yourselves. (4) Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. (5) Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, (6) who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, (7) but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. (8) And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

But what is it that Paul is calling upon us to emulate from Christ's example here? Dying on a cross? No. It is "*have this mind among yourselves...*". What mind? What attitude? Humility. Not being haughty. Concerning ourselves with loving others. Paul is not teaching us to be "obedient" by never resisting or trying to escape suffering. Once more: Jesus' suffering and death on the cross is absolutely unique. It was redemptive. It saved us.

You have another example from Paul's life:

Acts 22:20-30 And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him.' (21) And he

said to me, 'Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'" (22) Up to this word they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, "Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live." (23) And as they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, (24) the tribune ordered him to be brought into the barracks, saying that he should be examined by flogging, to find out why they were shouting against him like this. (25) **But when they had stretched him out for the whips, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, "Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?"** (26) When the centurion heard this, he went to the tribune and said to him, "What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman citizen." (27) So the tribune came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?" And he said, "Yes." (28) The tribune answered, "I bought this citizenship for a large sum." Paul said, "But I am a citizen by birth." (29) So those who were about to examine him withdrew from him immediately, and the tribune also was afraid, for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him. (30) But on the next day, desiring to know the real reason why he was being accused by the Jews, he unbound him and commanded the chief priests and all

the council to meet, and he brought Paul down and set him before them.

And again:

Acts 25:1-12 Now three days after Festus had arrived in the province, he went up to Jerusalem from Caesarea. (2) And the chief priests and the principal men of the Jews laid out their case against Paul, and they urged him, (3) asking as a favor against Paul that he summon him to Jerusalem—because they were planning an ambush to kill him on the way. (4) Festus replied that Paul was being kept at Caesarea and that he himself intended to go there shortly. (5) “So,” said he, “let the men of authority among you go down with me, and if there is anything wrong about the man, let them bring charges against him.” (6) After he stayed among them not more than eight or ten days, he went down to Caesarea. And the next day he took his seat on the tribunal and ordered Paul to be brought. (7) When he had arrived, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many and serious charges against him that they could not prove. (8) Paul argued in his defense, “Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense.” (9) But Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, “Do you wish to go up to Jerusalem and there be tried on these

charges before me?” (10) But Paul said, “I am standing before Caesar’s tribunal, where I ought to be tried. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you yourself know very well. (11) If then I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death. But if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Caesar.” (12) Then Festus, when he had conferred with his council, answered, “To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go.”

This should be more than enough evidence to definitively prove that there is nothing in Scripture that teaches that the Christian is to remain in an abusive relationship, suffer quietly, and think that it is God’s will for him to never raise a defense or take an escape.

Why Then?

Why is it then that so many people who profess to be Christians lay this load upon others? I say “others” because so many times the very people to push this kind of thing are not willing to follow their own theology when they are the ones in a spot!

Matthew 23:1-4 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, (2) “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, (3) so practice and observe whatever they tell you—but not what

they do. For they preach, but do not practice. (4) They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.

What is the mentality behind all of this then? I suggest to you it is this:

Colossians 2:16-23 Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. (17) These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. (18) Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, (19) and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God. (20) If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— (21) “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” (22) (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? (23) **These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they**

are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

This whole erroneous business has its roots in ascetic thinking. The idea that holiness can be furthered through severe treatment of the body. That we will somehow be made “better” in God's sight if we submit ourselves to evil and oppression and suffering, even when the door to the prison cell has been opened by angels! By this theology, the Israelites should have remained in Egypt in slavery and bondage to Pharaoh!

These notions also come from a wrong, unbiblical view of ourselves in Christ. Many Christians see themselves as wicked sinners fully deserving of hell and punishment by God. But that is not true. By God's mercy, we are now His children and there is no condemnation for us any longer. And guess what? *Even if it were true, do we really believe that ascetic suffering and torment is going to be the solution?* Many professing Christians are actually quite Roman in their thinking on these matters and may as well keep a whip handy to lash themselves with while they like prone in front of a statue on hard stone!

Here then are some practical points of application for us:

- You have every right before God to reject abusive treatment,

- You have every right before God to draw clear boundaries with people who are causing you harm,
- You have every right before God to end a relationship when you realize that the person is an unsafe, unhealthy person to be in relationship with,
- You have every right before God to go to the doctor, to take medication, to deliver you from disease and injury,
- You have every right before God to seek help and therapy in assisting your deliverance from mental and emotional suffering,
- You have every right before God to use the civil authorities (courts, police, etc) and your rights as a human being to stop or remedy evil committed against you,
- You have every right before God to defend yourself when attacked.

Let's say it one more time as we end.

“There is nothing redemptive or good in seeking God’s approval or pursuing some ‘higher’ degree of holiness through self-imposed suffering. And this is the key. When we choose to remain in suffering when there is a way of escape from it, then that suffering becomes self-imposed. And Scripture makes it very clear that asceticism, man-made religion, and severe treatment of the body does NOTHING good. It

will not and it cannot help us in growing in Christ.”

Therefore the Apostle Paul’s warning to us is worthwhile hearing once again:

Col 2: (20) If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations– (21) “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch”

Christ has suffered for us. He has redeemed us. We cannot and must not try to add to that redemption.