

The Mystery of Suffering

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A transcription of spoken ministry given in Washington, D.C., February 1, 1985

Scripture Reading:

Romans 5:1-5—Therefore having been justified on the principle of faith, we have peace towards God through our Lord Jesus Christ; by whom we have also access by faith into this favour in which we stand, and we boast in hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in tribulations, knowing that tribulation works endurance; and endurance, experience; and experience, hope; and hope does not make ashamed, because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.

(In the NIV it is says: *Suffering works perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope.*)

II Corinthians 4:17-18—For our momentary and light affliction works for us in surpassing measure an eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things that are seen, but at the things that are not seen; for the things that are seen are for a time, but those that are not seen eternal.

Recently, this matter of the mystery of suffering has been upon my heart. I think suffering is always a mystery. It is a mystery to the unbelievers and it is a mystery to the believers. We often hear people of the world ask this question: "If there is a God and if He is loving, how can all these sufferings happen in this world?" They try to put the blame on our God as if He has

brought all the suffering we see around us upon this world. They do not know that if you read the word of God, you find that suffering is not God's original purpose for mankind. On the contrary, God's original thought for man is glory, not suffering.

After God created man in His own image, He gave them dominion over all the created beings. There is not one word of suffering there. We also find that God put the man in the garden of Eden, and the word Eden means *pleasure*. In other words, God's intention for mankind is pleasure, real pleasure, not pleasure of sin, of course. So God's original thought towards man is not suffering at all.

In Psalm 139, the psalmist David said, "How precious are thy thoughts unto me O Lord." God's thoughts towards us are very precious, and they are many. But of course, for man to really enjoy pleasure and dominion, there is one condition, and the condition is obedience. God put man in the garden of Eden for pleasure, but on the condition that man should obey God. But unfortunately, man rebelled against God and sinned. Because of this, suffering has come into this world. So to put it very frankly, suffering basically is the result of sin. The wages of sin is death, and of course that includes all kinds of suffering. We have to see that man has brought suffering upon himself. We ourselves are to be blamed, not God. But this is not what we really want to talk about;

what we really need to understand before God is why it is that we as believers suffer.

Oftentimes, we have a wrong idea, thinking that after we have believed in the Lord Jesus, after He has saved us, surely now being our loving Father who cares for us, He will never allow us to suffer anymore. So when suffering comes to a believer, often we think it is strange. Sometimes we rebel against it. We murmur because we have the wrong concept that we as Christians should not suffer, God will never allow us to suffer; but that is wrong.

Now in order to know this matter of suffering, we have to go back to see our Lord Jesus. Our Lord Jesus was the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. Slain—that is suffering. He was the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world because God in His foreknowledge knew that the man whom He would create would rebel against Him. Because of this, suffering became a necessity. But instead of letting men suffer as they should suffer, God Himself suffered for us. We have to see that because of our sins God Himself suffered. He suffered in the sense that He spared not His only beloved Son. Think of it—God has only one beloved Son who has pleased Him always. They are one, absolutely one, together from eternity, and yet God had to give up His Son and made His Son the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. How much suffering must be involved with God! The suffering of God far, far surpasses

any suffering that we ever pass through or we ever can imagine. God is the first one who really suffered. Even before He created man, He knew He had to suffer. Before the foundation of the world He knew that, and from the foundation of the world His Son was destined to be the Lamb slain.

Think of our Lord Jesus. How much suffering He must have gone through! He who was equal with God emptied Himself. Now that is suffering. If you are very full and then you have to be emptied, what suffering that must be! He emptied Himself and He became a man. He humbled Himself, even unto death, the death of the cross.

Let us remember that even though it is not God's original purpose for man to suffer, after sin came into this world, suffering is unavoidable. It is a necessity. For this reason, God Himself suffered and His only begotten Son suffered. So suffering should not be something strange to us today.

Vicarious and Non-Vicarious Suffering

Now, when we think of the sufferings of Christ, they are of two kinds and this is something that we must distinguish. The sufferings of Christ can be vicarious, that is atoning. And there is the other kind—non-vicarious, non-atoning suffering.

You can see this in Isaiah 53, that prophecy concerning the suffering of Christ:

But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him, and with his stripes we are healed (vs. 5).

Yet it pleased Jehovah to bruise him; he hath subjected him to suffering. When thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin (vs. 10).

Now that is vicarious, atoning suffering. In other words, His suffering is to atone for our sins.

There you find our Lord Jesus, the One who knew no sin, was made sin for us. He offered Himself as a sin offering, therefore God Himself crushed Him, bruised Him on the cross. He was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities.

The time when our Lord Jesus was on the cross was approximately six hours. He was crucified at 9:00 in the morning and He expired at 3:00 in the afternoon. But the Bible says that from twelve noon, suddenly the scene completely changed. There was darkness, the sun hid itself, and our Lord Jesus cried out: "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" It was during those last three hours that God accepted His beloved Son as the sin offering for the sin of the world. It was during these three hours that God crushed Him, bruised Him on the cross. There He tasted death for every one. That is atoning suffering, and in that suffering He was alone. Nobody could be with Him. He trod the winepress alone. He suffered alone. You and I cannot have any share in that. All we do is to accept and receive the good of His atoning suffering. He is the only one who suffered in our stead. That is the atoning suffering of Christ, and in that we have no fellowship. We can only believe and receive and be in the good of it.

But the suffering Christ had another kind and it was non-vicarious, non-atoning suffering. It can best be illustrated during the first three hours He was on the cross. He was crucified by the Roman government, by the Jewish nation, by the world. The world crucified Him; man did it. And not only man mocked Him while He was on the cross, but in the unseen world, all the evil forces surrounded Him (see Psalm 22). All the unseen evil forces, together with the world, mocked Him, deserted Him, and crucified Him. He suffered not from

the hand of God; He suffered from the hand of man and of the enemy because of the conflict there. We as believers are called into fellowship with Him in this kind of suffering.

In Philippians it says: "To know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings." We are called to fellowship with the sufferings of Christ, not the vicarious kind because we cannot atone for other people's sin, or even for our own sin. Christ alone does it. But we are called into the fellowship of His sufferings of the non-atoning kind. Therefore, you find in the word of God that it always says not to think it is strange when you suffer when there is tribulation upon you. In the world you have tribulation but the Lord said, "Do not be afraid because I have overcome the world."

Now if we believers think that we are only called to go to heaven, to be saved, and not called to have fellowship with the sufferings of Christ, then we are really in a very dangerous situation. We are not mentally, spiritually prepared to suffer and that is the hardest part. But if you feel that we are called to have fellowship with the sufferings of Christ, then your whole outlook will be different. You will see suffering from a very different perspective.

Suffering to Learn Obedience

When you think of the sufferings of Christ, the non-vicarious kind, actually if you read the gospels, you will find they include a number of things. Number one, Christ suffered in order to learn obedience. As God, He never knew obedience. You cannot think of putting God and obedience together. You can only put God and command together. God is to command, never to obey. So as the Son of God, as God Himself, He never really knew obedience. He learned obedience

while He was on earth in the days of His flesh.

Who in the days of his flesh, having offered up both supplications and entreaties to him who was able to save him out of death, with strong crying and tears; (and having been heard because of his piety;) though he were Son, he learned obedience from the things which he suffered; and having been perfected, became to all them that obey him, author of eternal salvation (Hebrews 5:7-9).

When our Lord Jesus was on earth for thirty-three years, in the days of His flesh He learned one thing. He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. Of course, we know that while He was on earth, our Lord Jesus was perfect, not like us. We have a fallen nature in us; our flesh is ugly. We want to do our own things in our own way, but it always opposes God's will and God's way. But our Lord Jesus as a man was perfect. Even with His sinless human nature, or sinless self, His self is sinless. If He desired to do anything out of His own self, there was no sin involved; He could do it. It is not like you and me. When we try to do something out of our own self, we sin against God. But with our Lord Jesus it is different. He is the holy One. His self is a holy self. He can do things out of His own self and God will not hold Him as sinful, but even with His sinless self, holy self, He needed to learn obedience from the things which He suffered. In other words, again and again you find in the gospel of John He said, "I can do nothing out of myself. I cannot say anything out of myself. I do not judge of myself." Again and again throughout His life He denied Himself, and when you deny yourself, suffering is involved. I think there is no suffering greater than denying yourself. But in denying Himself, even His holy self, sinless self, He was willing to be in such obedience to the Father,

He suffered in a sense. Yes, He learned obedience through the things which He suffered. Now do not think that in obeying the Father our Lord Jesus did not suffer. He did suffer.

For instance, even when He was twelve years old, He knew for sure that He must be occupied with His Father's business. He stayed back in Jerusalem for that purpose, but when His earthly parents found Him they could not understand. The Bible says that He even obeyed them and went back with them and stayed there until He was thirty years old. Think about those days from twelve years old to thirty years old, when He was hidden in Nazareth. He was a carpenter making things, and probably He made a number of coffins even though He could raise the dead. What suffering it must have been to Him! He could easily raise the dead, but He was there making coffins for them. Why? because the Father's time had not come yet. He had to learn obedience through the things which He suffered. During those years He looked around and saw people, He saw things that should not be. He could easily do something about it, and one day He would, but during those years He could not.

If you think of Moses, when he was forty years old, he went out. He thought God was going to do something through him, and he started to do something. He could not wait because there was that inward conviction there. But think of our Lord Jesus. He had the same conviction, stronger than Moses, and yet He learned obedience from the things which He has suffered. Throughout His life He denied Himself, His holy self, to learn obedience.

Man, through *disobedience*, entered into suffering. But here you find a man who suffered to learn *obedience*. I think this is one of the sufferings of Christ that we are

called to fellowship with.

For to this have ye been called; for Christ also has suffered for you, leaving you a model that ye should follow in his steps (I Peter 2:21).

The vicarious suffering of Christ is not a model, is not an example for us to follow; it is salvation, redemption. But there is a part of Christ's suffering which He sets before us as a model, as an example for us to follow in His steps. And we are called to suffer with Christ in this particular sense, that we are called to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him. Who wants to do that? If it is not because we are constrained by the love of Christ, nobody wants to do that. And if it is not because of the sufficient grace of God, nobody can do that. But it is very clear in the word of God. The Lord Jesus said, "Unless you deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me, you cannot be my disciple. You cannot be where I am. If you are where I am then you are honored, respected by the Father." Even though we are saved, yet we know this fallen nature, this self, is deeply rooted in us.

Why must Christians suffer? Why does God allow suffering to believers? One reason is that through suffering we may be delivered from this self-centeredness and we may learn obedience. Through obedience, through suffering, character may be built in us.

Sympathy Towards Mankind

The non-vicarious suffering of Christ includes another thing—His tremendous sympathy towards mankind. Our Lord Jesus' heart is so big, He literally embraces the whole world. If you read the gospels you find that no matter who you are, whether you come from high society or from the lowest place in the world, whether you are grown up or a child, no matter who you

are, the Lord Jesus has tremendous sympathy with mankind. That is one reason why He is so attractive. He attracts the children; He attracts everybody, in one sense, because His sympathy is so full, so open. And because of such sympathy He suffered. If a person is cold-blooded, he can look around at all the sufferings of the world and it is nothing to him. He does not feel anything. But the more you are sympathetic, even though the suffering may not be directly upon your life, the more you suffer. You suffer with those who suffer. And our Lord Jesus has tremendous sympathy. In Hebrews it says our High Priest is full of sympathy for us because He has been tempted in all things without sin. He has gone through anything, everything that a human being has ever gone through or will go through. He was tempted in all things without sin. So His sympathy is towards those who are being tempted, and because of that He suffered.

We are called into fellowship with His suffering in this same manner. As the Bible says: as one suffers we all suffer. We are members of one body. When one member suffers, how can the rest of the body feel glorious, feel nothing? Even in our physical body if a little finger is pricked, the whole body suffers. How much more in the spiritual reality? Often we think that the church is *as* the body of Christ, but actually the Scripture never puts it that way. It never puts it that the church is *as* the body; the church *is* the body of Christ. And this spiritual reality is much more real than the physical reality. In the body of Christ, if one member suffers, as we find in I Corinthians, then the whole body suffers. If one member is glorified, the whole body shines. That is sympathy. And we are called into that kind of suffering, to suffer for that reason.

Suffering for the Church

Of course, in connection with that, Christ suffered for the church. He loved the church and gave Himself for it. How He desired to sanctify it, purify it by the washing of the water with the blood that He may present it to Himself a glorious church without spot or wrinkle or any of such sort, holy and blameless. Our Lord Jesus suffered for the church, He gave Himself for the church, and we are called into fellowship with Him in this area.

In Colossians 1 the apostle Paul said, "I am to fill up that which is behind of the sufferings of Christ for His body, that is the church's sake." In other words, Christ suffered for the church, He gave birth to the church. But there is a part of that suffering which He calls us to enter into with Him, and that part is to fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ for the body's sake. In Paul's life, how he labored, how he travailed, how he worked, how he prayed in order to present everyone perfect in Christ, in order to see that the church is really built up to the glory of God. This is suffering and the suffering of Paul in that area was tremendous. And we are called into fellowship of that kind of suffering, not only in sympathy with people, but for the completion of the body of Christ. Oh, that we may give ourselves to travail, to pray, to labor in love, to share the Christ we have with our brothers and sisters, and in doing that you do suffer. You have to bear people in your heart and travail for them, and this is part of the suffering we are called into.

Suffering from the World

In the sufferings of Christ of the non-vicarious kind, He also suffered from the world because He is so different. He is not of the world. He is other-worldly, therefore the world

cannot understand Him. Because He does not belong, therefore the world persecuted Him and cast Him out. There is a great area of the sufferings of Christ that come from the world because He is other-worldly.

Of course, we know that in that area we are also called to share with Him in His sufferings. He said we are not of the world as He is not of the world. And because we do not belong to the world, the world hates us. If anyone desires to live a godly life, he will be persecuted. The apostle Peter said, "Do not think it is strange when tribulations come upon you." If you suffer because you are a Christian, if you suffer for Christ's sake, if you suffer for the sake of righteousness, if you suffer for the kingdom of God, rejoice. We are not only called to be saved, we are also called to suffer. Are we prepared for that? Sometimes, we suffer a little bit from the world and we already feel uneasy and strange. If we do not suffer with Him, we cannot reign with Him. Christ must suffer first, then enter into glory. Again, this is an area in which we are called into His fellowship.

Suffering in Spiritual Conflict

And of course there is another area. Our Lord Jesus was engaged in a tremendous battle, a conflict. It is the battle of the ages, that is the conflict between God and the enemy. The enemy, throughout His life, tried to kill Him, get rid of Him, and He suffered a great deal from that. In a sense, we are called into fellowship with His suffering.

We have to realize that there is a spiritual conflict going on, and in this spiritual conflict we are not spectators; we are very deeply involved. The issue is whether God is going to get His kingdom or whether the enemy is able to frustrate and to delay the kingdom of God upon this earth. And this

issue is very real in our daily life, not only in big decisions, but also in the small things of our life. In such a warfare, every little thing counts. The enemy is trying to move us away from standing for God and for His kingdom. Because of this, if we stand, we suffer.

Sometimes, you wonder why there does not seem to be any visible, rational reason to suffer; but, there is reason in the unseen world. Something is going on there. Think of Job. It is a good illustration. Something was going on in the unseen world, and Job had to suffer because of it. So let us remember that to a believer suffering is nothing strange. On the contrary, you will find that there is good reason why God allows believers to suffer.

Now let's look at Romans 5. It is a transitional chapter. In other words, before Romans 5 you find justification, and after Romans 5 you find sanctification. Romans 5 stands in the middle of it. In a sense it is bringing us from justification into sanctification, from being saved into being conformed to the image of God's beloved Son. In other words, Romans 5 makes the transfer.

Therefore having been justified on the principle of faith, we have peace towards God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Now thank God for that. Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God. There is nothing between God and us through our Lord Jesus Christ.

By whom we have also access by faith into this favour in which we stand. Today, we stand in favor. We have been accepted in the Beloved. God has accepted us and we stand in God's favor now.

And we boast in hope of the glory of God. Having been justified, having peace, and being in favor with God, what is our hope? We boast of a future hope and the hope is the glory of God. One day, there will be glory. That is the ultimate,

glory is the ultimate word, not just justified. Justified is only the beginning. But being justified we look forward to the glory of God.

And not only that, but we also boast in [suffering]. When we are boasting in the hope of the glory of God, at the same time, we need to boast in suffering. Now, we do boast in the hope of the glory of God, but do we boast in suffering? We cry in suffering. To boast in suffering does not mean we try to court suffering, we try to make ourselves suffer. That is foolish. Even Peter said, "Do not suffer because you did something evil. If you did something evil and you suffer, there is nothing in it. It is just vanity." And some people are doing that. Even among believers you find that some mystics tried to court suffering, as if suffering has merit in it. Suffering does not have any merit in it. But why do we boast in suffering? Suffering itself has nothing to be boasted of; when you suffer, you suffer. But it says we boast in suffering because suffering works out something. That is where the boast is. Suffering works endurance, or in other versions, suffering works patience or perseverance, and perseverance works experience or character. This is something very important.

Suffering Works Character

What is the purpose of God in allowing His children to suffer? We say that suffering is not the original purpose of God for mankind. Mankind suffers because of their sin, and they do suffer. But why do Christians suffer? There is one reason—through suffering God is working character in us. God's eternal purpose is that we may be conformed to the image of His beloved Son, and only in that can we be the eternal bride of the Lamb. That is God's purpose. God's purpose is glory. One day His beloved Son will lead many sons

into glory, but you cannot get into glory without character. If we are saved we will go to heaven, yes; and we think it will be wonderful to walk on the street of gold. But it is transparent gold and everything in your heart is being exposed. Now do you dare to walk on that street? Everybody will see your heart. Probably you will try to find a place to hide yourself. You will not enjoy heaven. You do not have the character.

God's intention is to build up character in us, and the best way to build up character is suffering. Isn't that wonderful? But we do not want to suffer. In other words, you do not want glory, do you? To a believer, suffering is entirely different. It is not because of sin. It is because God is determined to work character, Christ-character in us that we may have that character and may be fit to be His bride, to enter into eternal glory. That is the meaning of suffering.

Throughout history you can see that people who suffer more seem to be deeper in their life of Christ. Now of course, sometimes suffering can crush a person, that is true, but God really has measured our suffering. If we only trust Him, He will never allow us to suffer more than we can bear. He measures it beforehand. He puts His grace in us, enough to endure, and endure simply means to outlast it. If that temptation or suffering is ten days, then you can stand it for eleven days. That is endurance; you endure temptation, you outlast it. God knows how much Christ there is in you. He was tempted in all things without sin. So God knows how much Christ is in you, and He will measure your temptations, He will measure your sufferings. He knows the Christ in you is sufficient to endure it, to outlast it, if you trust Him. But if you do not trust Him, of course you fall.

So actually, you find suffering works out character. Christ's

character is being built in you. Our selfish, old character was built up through the years before we were saved. Right after we were born, we have an old life and that old life has an old nature. Because we always lived according to our nature, gradually we developed all kinds of habits; put the habits together, and you have our character. That is what we were. But now we have to be remade a new creation. If anyone is in Christ Jesus he is a new creation; old things have passed away and all things are new and all things are of God. Therefore, with a new life in us, having a new nature, now we need to learn to follow that new nature and let that nature be developed into character. Of course, you have the conflict between the new nature and the old nature. That is why we need to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow the Lord. Then the character of Christ will gradually be built in us and that makes us fit for the kingdom and fit for the glory.

And hope does not make ashamed, because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us. The wonderful thing is that all the time we suffer, the Holy Spirit who dwells in us is shedding the love of God abroad in our hearts. It is only by the power of love that we are able to suffer, able to endure, able to have character built in, and able to have hope. Without the love of God in our hearts, suffering will crush us. But thank God, the Holy Spirit will shed abroad in our hearts the love of God. Even though we suffer outwardly, inwardly we are flooded with the love of God. We know that God loves us, and because He loves us He chastens us. And that love gives us the endurance and eventually works out character.

In II Corinthians 4:17 it says, *For our momentary and light affliction works for us in surpassing measure an eternal weight of glory.*

The sufferings we have today are momentary, that is short lived, temporary, and light. Of course, when we suffer, we think it is very heavy, but when you think of glory, suffering and glory go together. When you try to measure, weigh suffering, one verse says, glory outweighs suffering. Glory is heavier; it outweighs suffering because suffering is momentary; and glory is eternal. One is light, the other is heavy. We are not looking at the things that are seen. If we look at the things that are seen, we will faint, we will be crushed, but we look at the things that are unseen, because the things that are seen are temporary, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

What are we looking at? What are we looking for? If we are looking at the temporary, the seen, then there is one way to live our life. We try to avoid as much suffering as we can, we try to compromise with the world, so that we will not suffer in that area, we will not suffer for righteousness' sake, and so forth. And because we are so useless, even Satan does not care about us. Or if we are looking at the things unseen and we are looking for the eternal glory, we will be involved in all these sufferings. But thank God, He is working out something glorious in us.

Look at the Old Testament or the New Testament. You will find any one who is used of the Lord invariably has suffering in their lives. For instance, Joseph. How much Joseph suffered! And he suffered not because of his fault; he suffered because of his good, because of his righteousness, because he feared God. Yet he had tremendous suffering, long suffering, but out of the suffering God worked out glory. You see glory in Joseph.

Think of David and how much he suffered. If you read Psalms, you can see the sufferings that David

went through in his life. But through those sufferings God was working some character in him. The kingly character had to be worked out. Saul did not suffer as much as David, but there was no character in him.

Think of Paul. If you read II Corinthians, he mentions all the things that he suffered and also how he suffered for the church. Such a character of Christ was built in him. And he could say, "There is the crown of righteousness waiting for me."

Think of Peter and how he suffered. And eventually he became one of the foundations in the New Jerusalem. Whether you look at it from the Bible or at all the men and women of God throughout the centuries, you find that suffering is part of their life. But because their attitude towards suffering is not negative, their attitude towards suffering is positive, therefore they gave God opportunity to work in their lives something that will register in eternity. So as we live in this world full of sufferings, and as we think of believers who suffer, or we ourselves have gone through sufferings of all kinds, not only physical suffering, some sickness, some privation, some weakness, some mental suffering, spiritual suffering, when we think of all these things I feel that we need to settle it once and for all, knowing deep down in our hearts that it is the love of God. He loves us as sons; therefore He chastens us that we may be made partakers of His divine nature. This is the purpose of God that we may be conformed to Christ and be His bride forever. So let us remember suffering is unto glory, and if this is true in the life of Christ, certainly this principle must apply to all of us.
