

Meaning of Suffering – James 1:1-4

INTRODUCTION – After salvation in Christ all believers can enter heaven immediately. Yet many believers have been left behind on earth to witness for Christ. Many if not all do so with many trials and difficulties. These difficulties range from mild recurring sicknesses to being thrown into the lion’s den. The life of the child of God is a life of suffering more than that of unbelievers. In the case of the unbelievers they suffer because they live in a sin sick world. There are natural disasters, sicknesses, calamities and evil men and women and children hurting and killing one another. These are common amongst all men. However, believers have to suffer for Christ as part of their life of witness on earth. There is no getting around this truth. All believers have to recognise and accept this as part of their sojourn on earth. Paul described the calling of every believer as a life of suffering for Christ in **Philippians 1:29-30** “For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake; **30** Having the same conflict which ye saw in me, and now hear *to be* in me.” [emphasis added]

It is indeed a privilege to suffer for Christ; no human being can count it a privilege except for born again believers. Christ is the Son of God, the second Person of the Godhead! It is truly an honour! Yet more often than not believers murmur and complain when the suffering comes. These sufferings come in the form of sicknesses, persecution from wicked men, the devil and his minions, natural and man-made disasters, and including the aches and pains from growing old. These are some of the sufferings every child of God will have to face in his witness for Christ. This truth of suffering for Christ has been a conditional acceptance rather than an unconditional acceptance. It appears as if some believers have set predetermined conditions with God that they ought not to suffer say terminal illnesses or at least very painful ones or loss of loved ones or limbs. When these conditions are set in the believer’s heart, unending murmurings, self pity and even depression are the symptoms that reveal this inward belief. We need to have the right biblical understanding of what it means to suffer for Christ. Anything short of this will result in sin and a failed witness for Christ.

- I. **Suffering Defined** – The word “suffering” means “to experience a sensation” that is usually painful. It does not describe where the source of the pain is. It could come from the world around us like the rain and the sun and the things of nature around us. It could come from man. It could also come from the world of diseases where bacteria and viruses dwell. Anything that brings pain to the child of God is called suffering. It is not limited to physical pain. It includes emotional and mental anguish as well. As long as the pain is in the believer it constitutes suffering.

- II. **What Constitutes Suffering** – But we need to distinguish between suffering for Christ and suffering for wrong doing. If it is for wrong doing and we are punished for it, we are not suffering for Christ. For example, when the child of God is disciplined for committing a sin in the church and he is emotionally and mentally hurt by the discipline which becomes public, he is suffering for wrong doing and not for Christ. On the other hand, when a Christian stands his ground and refuses to divulge the hiding places of other pastors and has to witness the death of his child, he suffers great inward grief and indescribable pain within his soul. He is suffering for Christ. Suffering is understood as part of the temptation that God allows into a believer’s life to strengthen his faith and trust in Christ. The word for temptation can mean seduction and persecution. It is a broader term than the word for “suffering.” For example, when a person is tempted by money or the luxurious life there is no suffering involved because he feels no pain. He enjoys the carnal life. That is a temptation but the devil uses seduction to do so. He can also use persecution that causes pain like the threats encountered by the three friends of Daniel. If they did not bow down to the image of Nebuchadnezzar, they would be thrown into the fiery furnace (cf. Daniel 3). They refused. They were thrown into the fiery furnace. **James 1:1-4** captures the meaning of temptation very well, “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus

Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting. **2** My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; **3** Knowing *this*, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. **4** But let patience have *her* perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing." This distinction between suffering for wrong doing and for Christ is very important and must be clearly understood. If a believer is suffering for wrong doing and he thinks it is for Christ, then he will not repent. He will continue to live in sin. His relationship with God is compromised.

Natural disasters – The world we live in after the fall of man into sin is a world of hurt. This did not change after God gave mankind a second chance via the global flood in Genesis 6-8. Man was still sinful from birth. Typhoons, cyclones, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunami, floods, firestorms, lightning, drought, famine, etc. are part of man's existence. The earth when it was first handed over to man at the beginning of creation was a very good earth. There was no hurt. Natural disasters were non-existent. The moment man fell into sin; the whole of creation fell with him. Just as the sun's rays and the rain fall on believers and unbelievers alike, the natural disasters afflict all mankind. It does not mean that the farm of the Christian farmer or the trailer of a Christian family will not be struck by natural disasters like a tornado. If that were true then sinners will believe in Christ for carnal reasons. God will not allow that.

However, one thing for sure is that the believer knows that his heavenly Father has afflicted him using the forces of nature to teach him a lesson on faith and trust. He is suffering for Christ.

Wicked people – Of all the sources of suffering for Christ, that which is brought about by wicked people is the best understood. Suffering caused by wicked people is experienced by most believers. This is the type they are most familiar with and requires the least explanation. Though it might be best understood, it still causes believers great pain. The reason is that these wicked people could be close friends or family members before the persecution started. Betrayal by such people is not only painful physically but also mentally and emotionally. Christ was betrayed by Judas Iscariot. Paul was betrayed by Demas who was once his fellow labourer. Demas deserted Paul and loved the world.

The subtle ways these wicked people employ to trick and hurt God's people are painful to bear. They creep into their hearts and have a relationship with them, and then when their guard is down thinking that they are among friends, the betrayal strike like a man thrusting a knife into the heart. The pain is excruciating. The closer the relationship the deeper the wound and greater is the pain.

Sickness – Diseases of all sorts have plagued mankind all through his sinful existence. It is no respecter of persons. The believer wants it no other way. But if all believers do not fall sick after salvation then every sinner will accept Christ because he wants to be physically healed and never to fall sick again! That would mean believing in a false gospel which makes it an anathema. That is why all believers are thankful that they are serving God in this same mortal body like everyone else so that they can also fall sick like everyone else! The BIG difference is that they know that it is the will of God concerning them and will trust God more and sing and praise God more in times of sickness. This is what all believers must conscientiously realize or else they will respond badly and wrongly and sin against God! **1 Thessalonians 5:16-18** "Rejoice evermore. **17** Pray without ceasing. **18** In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you." We know that God can heal all diseases if He chooses to do so but the question is not God's ability but His will for us. If it is God's will for us to have cancer or any other terminal illness, it is the best for us in terms of witness for Christ. It must draw us closer to God and not farther away. We pray more and lean on Him more than ever before.

Sickness is part of suffering for Christ. The prime example in the Bible is none other than Job. Before his sickness Job thought he knew God by the hearing of the ear. But after his sickness he

confessed that he had seen God. **Job 42:4-6** “Hear, I beseech thee, and I will speak: I will demand of thee, and declare thou unto me. **5** I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. **6** Wherefore I abhor *myself*, and repent in dust and ashes.” [emphasis added] The nearness that Job experienced can only become a reality through the suffering he endured for Christ!

Old Age – Remember that our earthen vessel could live more than 900 years once upon a time. God in His infinite wisdom cut that down by tenfold for man’s own good after what happened before the global flood in Genesis 4 and 6. God is the great Healer. Christ is the great Physician who like God is able to heal all diseases and keep all organs of our body healthy and strong regardless of age. If men and women could live 8 to 9 hundred years in the past, why is it so difficult for us to accept that a man who is 100 does not need to lose his sight or hearing or have any of his organs fail or weaken? Some may think and reason that, well, after the flood things were different. It is true that after the flood, the ages of mankind plunged tenfold. That does not mean that God is powerless against aging! God’s power is independent of time and conditions of the earth and the heavens. He is able to keep us healthy even when we are well past 100 years old, if He so chooses! Look at **Deuteronomy 34:7** “And Moses *was* an hundred and twenty years old when he died: his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated.” If God does not want His children to have healthy painless bodies when they grow old but to experience the pain of aging, then it is permitted by God to teach believers to learn truth in times of pain as they suffer for Christ through aging!

III. God is All-Powerful – God could have given all believers glorified bodies to serve and witness for Him on earth! But He did not even though we know that the glorified body is very suitable for the earthly environment as Christ demonstrated to us when He spent 40 days on earth after His resurrection and before His ascension. We thank God for that. Imagine a world where believers serve and witness for Christ as super humans, never growing old and never getting sick and never needing to sleep. But they will not learn and experience the sufficiency of God's grace and mercies. They will not pray as they ought. The blessings of tears mixed with joy after a trial and having suffered for Christ’s sake will not be a reality! Thank God that God is all powerful and He can do things that require power to do. There is no sickness God cannot heal. **Matthew 4:23-24** “And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people. **24** And his fame went throughout all Syria: and they brought unto him all sick people that were taken with divers diseases and torments, and those which were possessed with devils, and those which were lunatick, and those that had the palsy; and he healed them.” Yet God gave us a mortal body to serve and witness for Him that is able to suffer for Christ in order to taste the goodness of God’s grace and mercies in our lives.

Therefore suffering for Christ is not about a weak God, for God is always immutable in His omnipotence. Rather it is a matter of God’s mercy and grace in the believer’s life. The proper understanding of what constitutes suffering for Christ helps all believers to approach and react to suffering with submission and a complete unconditional surrender of our lives to Him. Therefore whenever we are called by God to suffer for Christ, we must be like the apostles in **Acts 5:41** “And they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name.”

CONCLUSION – We need to first ensure that we are suffering for Christ and not for wrong doing, otherwise we will suffer great loss in our witness for Christ by not repenting of our sins. **1 Peter 2:20-25** argues for this truth well, “For what glory *is it*, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take

it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer *for it*, ye take it patiently, this *is* acceptable with God. **21** For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: **22** Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: **23** Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed *himself* to him that judgeth righteously: **24** Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed. **25** For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.”

Once we are sure and honest with our soul that we are indeed suffering for Christ, then thank God that He has counted us worthy. Understand what constitutes suffering. The all powerful God can easily give to all believers a healthy and powerful body to serve Him with all the days of their sojourn, but He has chosen not to do so. He wants us to suffer for Christ. This is every believer’s calling as he witnesses for Christ on earth! Amen.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. A believer suffered a stroke and is left partially paralysed. Would you say that he is suffering for Christ if you know that it is not because of any wrong doing in his life?
2. A believer has AIDS because of his sinful life before he became a Christian. After he became a believer, the sickness did not go away. The doctor says that in fact it has gotten worse. He does not have more than a year to live. Can we say that he is suffering for Christ as a child of God now that he is saved?
3. A naughty son who is a Christian is defiant at home. His mother disciplines him. He says that he is suffering for Christ because he wanted to attend YF but his mother refused to let him as he has not done his assigned house chores given to him that Saturday morning. Would he be right to say that he is suffering for Christ?
4. An elder is disciplined for standing up against the BOE of a neo-evangelical church because he believes that his understanding of the doctrine of biblical separation is right. He refuses to stop teaching the doctrine of biblical separation in his church even though he knew that it is neo-evangelical when he first joined the church 15 years ago. Can he say that he is suffering for Christ?
5. A Christian brought Bibles and Christian material into a country that forbids such material. The Christian was not caught when he entered the country. When he was asked by immigration whether he had any Christian material, he lied that he did not. However he was caught at one of the underground meetings. He is charged in court for lying to the authorities. Can he say that he is suffering for Christ?