

The Cross Before Me

June 9, 2011

Session 2: Suffering Humbly

Bill Scofield

I. NOW AND THEN

A. In the last session **we talked about the time of trouble** that is coming upon the earth. We talked **about the cross**, and how Jesus always **prefaced discipleship with the revelation of the cross**. We also talked about the **doctrine of Satan**, which is always working to undermine the cross and the call to true discipleship. He does this because he does not want the saints to enter into the glory that is prepared for the saints who persevere until the end.

B. This may have been new information for some of you, while others have looked at these passages before. **My point for today is not simply to give you a sobriety about the subject of the end-times. I want to give you a sobriety about today.**

C. Sometimes we get this idea of the end-times that is still very disconnected from reality and human experience entirely. There is strong idealism regarding how we place ourselves in the end-times scenario. **There is big disconnect with the way that we see the events unfolding then, and the way that we see our lives playing out this afternoon.**

D. In other words, sometimes we see this scenario unfolding where we imagine ourselves being persecuted or in some manner of intense distress and having hearts that are fully steadfast and loyal to Jesus. It is very good to have this vision for myself, but it must be rooted in reality and, therefore, inspire action on my part today. The question should arise in your heart, **“If I am not steadfast and loyal to Jesus today when I am mistreated a little, then why should I believe that I would be in that day when I am mistreated much more?”**

E. The predominant paradigm within the protestant Church in the West is a strong dichotomy between the present ‘age’ and the ‘end times’. The end times are marked by darkness, the Great Tribulation, and suffering for the sake of name of Jesus, but that this age should be marked by **ease, comfort, popularity, and recognition.**

F. **There is not coming a day when the ‘end-times’ were still future at 3:15pm, and somehow by 3:16pm have entered into them.** The transition from the current level of comfort that we experience into a time when you will be martyred for having a prayer meeting in your basement isn’t as dramatic as we imagine.

G. **The view of the Christian life presented from Matthew to Revelation is tribulation now, and then GREAT tribulation then.** The Bible portrays something so different and foreign to us in regards to suffering. The reason is that **there was a dramatic shift in the teaching of the Church during the “Constantinian Shift”**¹. Since the Roman Empire, previously responsible for massive persecution and martyrdom of the Church, had been “Christianized” the understanding and teaching of the Church regarding suffering persecution for the sake of the Gospel became viewed as antiquated and archaic.

H. **Since the troubles arising from outside the Church helped them better understand the troubles within the Church, the understanding of the troubles within the Church was also perverted.** (e.g. self-flagellating, other extreme forms of asceticism)

II. DEMYSTIFYING THE SUBJECT OF SUFFERING

¹ **Constantinian shift** is a term used by Anabaptists and other groups to describe the political and theological aspects of the 4th-century process of Constantine’s legalization of Christianity.

A. For this reason we should take a few minutes and de-mystify the issue a bit. Suffering sometimes just gets lumped into this realm of obscurity, and sometimes even with zeal to get it right we lack clarity on what really glorifies Jesus. **Some want to imagine that if you are a Christian and you stub your toe, then somehow you are either glorifying Jesus by it or it is magically making you more holy.**

B. It is helpful to understand that there are a few different types of suffering that the Bible talks about. The Apostle James encouraged believers to understand and find joy in **various kinds of trials and suffering.**

² Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, (Jam 1:2 NASB)

C. The first area is simply **self-imposed suffering**. That is, the areas of pain that you experience as a result of your own poor choices, sin, immaturity, and lack of wisdom. The reason that I view this one as important to talk about is because this really does play more of a role in the pain of our day-to-day lives than most of us imagine.

D. We have to respond to this kind of suffering with humility, acknowledging our weakness, and crying out to God to help us overcome areas of compromise and give us wisdom. **Acknowledging the fact that we are responsible for much of our own pain and disappointment can produce the fruit of meekness and long-suffering as we are more patient with others when we realize our own need for patience.**

³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit... ⁴ "Blessed are those who mourn (to God because of their weakness)... (Mat 5:3-4 NASB)

E. The next category of suffering is **circumstantial**. This area would include mostly sickness and not having enough money for your basic needs. This area of suffering is handled differently than others, Biblically. Our posture towards sickness and lack of basic provision is one of prayer and contending for breakthrough.

¹⁶ ... pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. (Jam 5:16 NASB)

⁹ "Pray, then, in this way...¹¹ 'Give us this day our daily bread. (Mat 6:9, 11 NASB)

F. The next way that everyone suffers is **relationally**. This example is clear to everyone, and (although it is commonly confused with the first area of self-imposed problems because of the way relationships work) it is the one that we all struggle the most with on a daily basis.

G. The final category is **suffering for the Gospel**. This is the category that is most spoken of by the Apostles. Unfortunately, we think of this area mostly as something that missionaries in Muslim countries will experience. The Apostles taught differently.

¹¹ persecutions, and sufferings, such as happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium and at Lystra; what persecutions I endured, and out of them all them Lord rescued me! ¹² Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. (2Ti 3:10-12 NASB)

H. James actually brought up these various kinds of suffering to help them make sense of what was happening and what was about to happen. These various kinds of trials were working that they might have **endurance**.

² Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, ³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. (Jam 1:2-3 NASB)

I.I know that we have heard this many times, but it has been quoted as rhetoric so many times (*including by me*) that this makes little sense to us. **Why do you need endurance?** You need endurance if something even harder than your current trial is coming! In other words, this trial becomes God's means of getting through the trials that are coming with greater intensity.

III. DON'T BE SURPRISED AT SUFFERING

A.The 1st century Church always believed that the Church would go through the Great Tribulation. In fact, there was no other eschatology taught until Augustine except for by a few men who were rejected for heretical teachings. Classic or Historical Premillennialism² was the ONLY eschatology of the Church for two centuries. It wasn't until Augustine, who first developed the framework for any other eschatology, (*with the exception of Origen who was called anathema*) that believers were of any other frame of mind.

B.So the early Church had very clear understanding of the Apostolic teachings, and understood the role of suffering in light of the coming Tribulation. The Apostles were diligent to keep suffering as a focal point of the early Church in light of this.

¹² Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; (1Pe 4:12 NASB)

¹ Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, (1Pe 4:1 NASB)

¹⁷ ...if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him. (Rom 8:17 NASB)

² and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith, ³ so that no one would be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this. ⁴ For indeed when we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass, as you know. (1Th 3:2-4 NASB)

⁴ therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure. ⁵ This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering. (2Th 1:4-5 NASB)

C.The Apostles understood that their own sufferings were meant to be an encouragement to the Body of Christ. This is an awesome example of true leadership in the Church; **to be examples of suffering well!**

¹⁹ But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium (to Lystra), and having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. ²⁰ But while the disciples stood around him, he got up and entered the city. ... ²¹ ...they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, ²² strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." (Act 14:19-22 NASB)

² **Historical Premillennialism** is the belief that Jesus will return to reign on the earth for 1,000 years immediately following the 3 ½ year Great Tribulation period during which the Church will be on the earth.

IV. WHY SUFFERING?

A.Suffering, in all of these various forms, has the ability to expose with hidden fault lines in the heart, which would otherwise be left alone. These areas being left alone does not mean they don't touch your life. On the contrary, there are dozens of areas in each of our lives that are perverting our perspective, messing up our relationships with one another, and keeping our hearts at enmity with God and His ways.

B.At the end of the day these areas, hidden beneath the surface, are what cause us to either stand or fall in times of temptation. Our lives don't function on what is perceived or understood, but on what is actual. In reality, we are broken, prone to pride and anger, prone to wander from following hard after God, and then prone to re-define running hard after God so that we don't have to feel bad about it.

⁹ "The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked; Who can know it? (Jer 17:9 NKJV)

²¹ Would not God find this out? For He knows the secrets of the heart. (Psa 44:21 NASB)

C.The Lord knows our hearts perfectly. He also knows that two great events are coming upon the human race. First, He knows that there is coming a day when the most tremendous pressure to come upon the human race will come against the saints to turn from the Lord. Those who turn will go to the lake of fire forever.

⁹ Then another angel, a third one, followed them, saying with a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, ¹⁰ he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger; and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. ¹¹ "And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; they have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name." ¹² Here is the perseverance of the saints who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus. (Rev 14:9-12 NASB)

D.He also knows that another day is coming called the white throne judgment. Every human who has ever lived will stand before God and He will give a verdict of their lives. The outcome of that day is eternal. There will not be any negotiation or discussion. He knows the truth and He will reveal that truth openly.

¹¹ Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. ¹² And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. ¹³ And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. ¹⁴ Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵ And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (Rev 20:11-15 NASB)

E.Given the severity of these two events, our Father is not willing to let us remain undisturbed. He has designed us in such a way that as we are disturbed by something as common as our spouse hurting our feelings, ***if we agree with the grace of God He can actually deal with these areas of weakness and pride that leave us vulnerable to compromise.***

⁵ ... and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE. ⁶ Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, (1Pe 5:5-6 NASB)

- F. We usually surround ourselves with people and activities that strengthen the delusion of who we are at our core. We would all love to believe that what we are like inside is what we see when all of our circumstances are favorable. (*which is an idea we got from humanism*) In reality, we seldom get a good look at our inward condition. Only when the comforts and inner scaffolding that keep us propped up are momentarily brought down do we get a glimpse of reality. Again, ***we must be acquainted with reality in order to deal with it.***
- G. In discipline God treats us as sons. Just like an earthly father prepares his son for life situations that their young minds cannot possibly conceive of, so our heavenly Father disciplines us for things that are coming that our mind cannot conceive of right now. Just as a foolish son rejects the broken discipline of a human father, we are infinitely more foolish to reject those things that our Father in heaven uses to discipline us. ***If seen rightly, we would understand that the discipline of our Father is the only hope that we have of finishing this race well and with a great inheritance in the age to come, and we would covet it.***

⁶ FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES." ⁷ It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? (Hbr 12:6-7 NASB)

V. JOY AND SUFFERING

A. When we look at the New Testament Church we have to acknowledge a different value system being in place, if not an entirely different message. Joy and suffering were almost always presented as being at work at the same time.

⁴⁰ ...calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and then released them. ⁴¹ So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name. (Act 5:40-41 NASB)

²² ...the magistrates tore off their clothes and commanded them to be beaten with rods. ²³ And when they had laid many stripes on them, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to keep them securely. ... ²⁵ But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. (Act 16:22-23, 25 NKJV)

²⁴ Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions. (Col 1:24 NASB)

³² But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, ³³ partly by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated. ³⁴ For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one. (Hbr 10:32-34 NASB)

B. It seems that they clearly knew something that either we do not know, or something that we are not willing to consider. Perhaps in the preservation of our way of life, we have not entered into the joy that they felt. Paul experienced the power and presence of Jesus on his heart as he suffered for the gospel.

¹⁰ that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; (Phl 3:10 NASB)

C. Brother Leo Story:

D. God is so merciful to us that He will actually take the Church through a period of testing prior to it coming upon the world so that we can get it! We are not supposed to be shaken like the world in the day of calamity, but we have to learn this first. The Lord will discipline His own children to prepare them to be a sanctuary in the days that are coming. There will be cities of refuge, places of supernatural provision and shelter. But the Church will first undergo a fresh baptism so that we can be effective in that hour. The Church will learn and live the message of the cross.

¹⁷ For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? (1Pe 4:17 NASB)

VI. HOW TO GROW FROM SUFFERING AND MISTREATMENT

A. You may have noticed that suffering and mistreatment are not magic. You don't automatically get hurt and grow in holiness, meekness, or any other virtue. We need the grace of God to grow in wisdom and discernment so that we don't continue to meander through life wasting those moments that were meant for our blessing. Here are a few practical things that we can do to purpose our hearts to grow in this area:

1. Pray for wisdom: *we need to grace of the Holy Spirit to be able to grow in this. Wisdom from God helps us discern what is happening in the moment so that we don't waste our trials and sufferings. Discernment from God will help you understand how you can respond in authentic humility while giving the Holy Spirit access to heal broken areas of your life.*

⁵ But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. (Jam 1:5 NASB)

2. Meditate on the life of Jesus: *reading, praying about, and studying the life of Jesus is the primary means of receiving grace to walk in meekness. Every word written about His life is a testimony to the power of forgiving love and meekness when you are mistreated. He was perfected (prepared to overcome by going to the cross) by these moments of suffering.*

¹⁰ For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings. (Hbr 2:10 NASB)

3. Serving: *serving others is one of the primary tools that Jesus gave us to cultivate hearts that consider other before protecting ourselves and our stuff. When we make ourselves use our time to serve someone else instead of on things that make us feel more secure about life, then the difficulties that arise cause us to deal with our self-centered nature and to receive patience and healing from the Lord.*

⁴⁵ "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." (Mar 10:45 NASB)

4. Never justifying your carnal responses to mistreatment: *never allow your heart to justify responding carnally to mistreatment. If you allow it, your heart will deceive you in a moment and you will believe that you are justified in retaliating evil for evil. Though you fall short often, always have it as your goal to love those who hate and mistreat you in practical ways. (including your response to them)*

⁴⁴ "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you maybe sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Mat 5:44-45 NASB)

5. Practice silence when you feel the surge of anger arise: *many believers are stuck in a cycle of lashing out in anger followed by a strengthening of the stronghold of pride and anger resulting in it being more difficult to resist the temptation next time. Some have the value system of meekness and immediate forgiveness of their enemies, but it never seems to make it into their lives because they do not control their tongues in the middle of an argument if they feel hurt.*

⁶ And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell. (Jam 3:6 NASB)

6. **Regular fasting:** *I've not tried anything which consistently keeps my actual condition before my eyes, and keeps my heart tender towards the Lord. Regular fasting will tenderize your heart and strengthen you to feel longings to be transformed by Jesus.*