

## Suffering and Justice

Aware of Christians undergoing sometimes terrible suffering due to persecution makes me reflect more and more on the deeper issues in Scripture, issues we normally prefer to ignore. Following are two reflections that may serve to provoke thought in your life too, and perhaps result in blessing.

**Suffering.** There's something so basic about the Book of Hebrews that we totally miss it. It's this: The author of this epistle really wanted his readers to experience suffering. Yes, we need to understand Christianity better. The initial readers of Hebrews were Jewish believers in Jesus who, to avoid persecution by the unbelieving Jews in their nation, were ready to abandon their faith in Jesus and return to traditional, Pharisaic Judaism. The author argues that they mustn't do that, but rather to accept the persecution and the suffering and loss that their faith *necessarily* entailed. Necessarily?

Repeatedly, the author of Hebrews points out that Jesus suffered. And the author repeatedly warns against disobedience. In other words, obedience and suffering are linked. "Jesus suffered death," and His suffering made Jesus "perfect" (2:9-10). **"He learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, He became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him"** (5:8). Suffering that results from obedience to Christ, such as due to persecution, is the essence of Christianity.

We suffer due to persecution not merely because of our identity with Jesus, although that's a huge part of it. The reason is bigger than that. A great cosmic conflict between God and evil is raging in this world that God created and, if we're following Jesus, we're ineluctably involved. In this horrible conflict, God wins by suffering, that is, by surrendering to the evil that hates Him and suffering because of it. Jeremiah 21 reveals, in cameo and proleptically, God's strategy.

The monarchy began with David and came to an end because of Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar was thus an anti-David, in the same way that the future anti-Christ is anti-Jesus. Nebuchadnezzar was the negation, the counterfeit, the enemy of David. The coming anti-Christ is that on a greater scale. Jeremiah 19 reprises Genesis 6:5-8, and it is proleptic of the events of the Book of Revelation, except it's not the nation of Judah but the whole world that is under judgment.

So, Nebuchadnezzar had besieged idolatrous Jerusalem, and he would capture the city and pitilessly murder everyone in it. God would see to it that that hideous judgment happened. But if people would believe His word thru the prophet Jeremiah and flee the city, surrendering to the Babylonians, they would escape death, but go into exile. Exile was like death, but it meant one future day returning to the Land under their coming Messiah. For Judah, the key to life was surrendering to the enemy, trusting in God to one day vindicate and restore them!

This is why Jesus had to submit to Satan's hateful will that He be dead. Jesus surrendered to the enemy! He did it obediently as the Suffering Servant and He did it trusting in the Father to vindicate and resurrect Him. And that obedience saves us, His followers. And that's the very reason we are to do the same. In this era, we followers of Jesus, also obedient servants of God, surrender our lives, submitting to persecution and suffering, knowing and trusting that God will vindicate and resurrect us to reward and blessing. It's how we defeat evil! Yes, the wicked powers seem to prevail now. It seems that they are in control. But God has condemned them and one day His victory will be realized. I can go even further and say this: If we're not suffering persecution or loss in some way in our lives, it's because we're not serving God as we should. We're not truly following Christ. We don't get it because we don't *want* to get it. We love our Christianity as it is, comfortable and peaceful.

In transcendent love, Jesus suffered and died so that others might be saved. Our motive should be the same, *viz*, love for others that they too might be saved by hearing from us the Gospel. It's God's will that, to participate with Him in His defeat of evil, we bear testimony to the world around us and submit to the suffering that results. Our trust in God and the self-sacrificing love for others that we show are thus put on full display to the glory of God. We're on God's side, the side of good, and love and trust, rather than the side of hate and indifference, which is the side of evil. In this physical world that God made, we embodied people must demonstrate, in real time and space, our belief. We must actually show by our lives that we're on the side of God and His goodness. Mental agreement with biblical propositions doesn't do it. Union with Christ is a positional truth. We must make it a real, living truth, just as Jesus had to make His obedience real by suffering so horribly. Adam's disobedience brought death; obedience to God results in life.

Something further: In worldly honor/shame societies, it is shameful to suffer loss (of anything), to surrender to one's enemy, to be persecuted. It is, however, honorable to get revenge, to fight back, or at least to refuse to be persecuted if not to be among the persecutors. So submitting to persecution embraces shame. Thus Jesus endured the "shame" of the

cross. And we endure the “shame” of suffering persecution; it’s accepting being humiliated. We willingly suffer shame in the expectation that God will one day reverse things. That’s what “overcome” refers to in Revelation 2 and 3. It also explains the theology of weakness that Paul develops in his 2 Corinthians.

Embracing humiliation forcefully repudiates the pride and selfishness of Satan. We honor Jesus by wanting to be like Him, instead of living out Satan’s ungodly character and values. Suffering persecution participates in the experience and life of Jesus, in which exaltation follows humiliation. Jesus defined what Christianity is, **“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me”** (Luke 9:23). It’s adopting the character and values of the Son: willingly being humiliated and suffering, in selfless love, in order that others may be blessed. Suffering thus is purposeful and of immense value. Our glorying in this modern American life, by the way, in our freedoms, prosperity, peace and comforts, is *not* being blessed by God (as we foolishly suppose) but the adoption of worldly values and beliefs. The soft life we crave is Satan’s ploy to trap us into wasting our life. We must be discerning!

**Justice.** God is love, yes, but He is also just. His justice demands that doing wrong be punished, even when it involves His own beloved people. Abraham’s faith lapsed when he took Hagar the Egyptian to have a son by her instead of by Sarah. What he did subsequently was even worse, he oppressed both Hagar and Ishmael. What Sarah and Abraham did in Genesis 16 and again in 21 was deplorable. What Sarah and Abraham did reprised what happened in the Garden. Sarah was just like Eve, saying to her husband, “take.” And “he took” just as Adam did. Abraham “listened to his wife” just as Adam did. And there are striking verbal and thematic parallels between the Genesis account and that in Exodus. For example, *Hagar* means “sojourner,” which is what the Israelites were to be in Egypt. In Genesis 16, the Hebrew family adopted an Egyptian son (Ishmael), in Exodus 2 an Egyptian family adopted a Hebrew son (Moses). The Genesis 21 narrative is proleptic of the Exodus 2 narrative of Moses’ infancy. That Genesis injustice may have been the reason the Israelites were later enslaved in Egypt, as a judgment for the actions of their ancestor. Something else: The Genesis 16 debacle occurred immediately after God gave Abraham the covenant in Chapter 15, just as the egregious Golden Calf episode occurred immediately after the Sinai covenant.

In Genesis 18, Abraham had confronted the Lord, “Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (v. 25b). The Lord indeed does right! He holds everyone accountable, *especially* those who’ve been uniquely privileged. According to Genesis 12:1-3, the elect people are responsible for bringing blessing to others, and God holds them accountable for failing in that responsibility, which is what Abraham and Sarah did. They not only failed to bless Hagar, they brought evil, oppression, upon her. I’m not saying that Egypt was just in enslaving the Israelites. Rather, they were God’s agents in seeing to it that justice was fulfilled. (The same holds for Babylon causing the Exile in 586 BC.)

Yet – and this is too wonderful to comprehend – it was precisely during that Egyptian bondage that God created an entirely new nation. It was as if Egypt was the womb in which Israel would gestate and be delivered (the Exodus) into new life, and God would then take Israel as His adopted son (at Sinai). In God’s sovereignty, that sinful episode with Abraham and his wife and Hagar was proleptic of God’s great work in creating the Nation of Israel. God is inscrutable in His all His works. We see, by the way, the same thing occurring later in history: While the Nation of Israel is under the judgment of Exile for its idolatries and its failure (actually, refusal!) to extend the Abrahamic blessing to Gentiles, a greater and more perfect, embodied Israel, an obedient Israel, that is, Jesus the Messiah, came to bring salvation and blessing to Israel. And not only to Israel. Even *more* wonderful is, that same salvation is extended to the Gentile nations of the world (Romans 9-11) thru the agency of Jesus’ followers, those who identify with and are united to Him.

The greatest injustice in all history was putting the incarnate Son to death. He came into the world to bring life and blessing, but He was hated, rejected and killed. The suffering of Christians due to persecution for continuing Jesus’ mission of life and blessing perpetuates that same ghastly injustice. Injustice inevitably results in suffering. Only God can resolve the injustices and vindicate the sufferers. Out of darkness, God brings light. Out of nothing, all that exists. Out of chaos, suffering and death, life. And out of sin and suffering and injustice, God brings forth blessing.

God is sovereign Creator and Ruler. And Judge! He has given us a measure of freedom by which to make choices, and He holds us personally accountable for them. We must therefore be exceedingly careful how we pursue our lives, because we’ve entered into relationship with an infinitely just – and therefore dangerous – God. We, God’s elect, haven’t merely been called to do missions, we are *responsible* to do it! We followers of Christ are to mediate the Genesis 12 blessing to others. The blessing, of course, is Jesus. As Abraham was held accountable then, so are we now. God is mysterious but good, and His love and His ways are compelling. He’s commanded, and we’re here to serve Him with obedience. To refuse to extend life and blessing to those desperate for it is injustice in the extreme. It reprises Israel’s unjust withholding of blessing from the Gentile nations. God’s justice does not allow that to go unpunished. So, let’s be faithful.