

FELLOWSHIP WITH CHRIST IN HIS SUFFERINGS¹

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Mother was happy to give birth to a baby boy. What a blessing he might become to the world! Perhaps he might even become the world's long-looked-for Deliverer. In those days, each woman hoped that she might be the happy woman to bear the Messiah. But soon mother realized that there was a problem: her baby boy did not seem to recognize her, nor did he notice any objects passed in front of his eyes. He lay in his crib without a flicker of sight awareness in his face. It soon became apparent that her baby was doomed to a life of darkness, never to play as other children play, never to see flowers, or the rising moon, or the setting sun. And worse, her baby's blindness must mean that some unusual guilt of sin rested on her or on her husband. Such a calamity could not come without a reason! As the neighbors came and went, she could see them whispering to themselves, "This must be punishment of some kind to mother and her husband." But thinking as hard as she could think, mother could not see any sin worse than other people were guilty of. Why must this calamity come to them?

The little boy couldn't go to school like other children, or learn to do anything useful. People pitied him and gave him little donations that he used

¹ Psalm 130:1-4. 343, 286.

to try to provide for himself. Sitting by the roadside begging was his only option in life. One day "as Jesus was walking along," he saw this blind man by the roadside. "His disciples asked him, 'Teacher, whose sin caused him to be born blind? Was it his own or his parents' sin?'" The disciples asked a very reasonable question. They believed in Fate. If someone suffers, there must be a special fault somewhere that calls for punishment. Either the blind man must feel bad, or his father and mother must feel bad. "Jesus answered, His blindness has nothing to do with his sins or his parents' sins. He is blind so that God's power might be seen at work in him.' . . . After he said this, Jesus spat on the ground and made some mud with the spittle; he rubbed the mud on the man's eyes and said, 'Go and wash your face in the Pool of Siloam.' (This name means "Sent.") So the man went, washed his face, and came back seeing" (John 9:1-7, GNB). The point that Jesus made is this: suffering is not punishment for sin; it is an opportunity for the grace of God to be especially manifested.

There is suffering everywhere in the world. The human mind and soul struggle to understand why there must be so much apparently undeserved suffering. Therefore some reason for it must be found, and that reason is *Bad Luck*.

No one thinks that the street people are more evil than the millionaire who drives past them in his limousine; therefore the only reason possible for their degraded lot in life must be that in previous existences "they" did bad things and now they deserve this *fate*. And, of course, the reason why

the millionaire can live in luxury is that in some previous existence “he” did good things. Now both are being paid back by *fate*. It is a law that can’t be changed.

But there is a glimmer of light. Many believe that if the street people will only start now to do good things, he can hope that in the future, he may climb the social, economic, and spiritual ladder. And if the present millionaire doesn’t watch out, in the future he may find himself on the streets. Thus *fate* gives at least a little hope to the hopeless poor and it gives a little deterrent to the selfish rich. The idea works! It produces at least some morality. It subdues the restless to restrain him from rebelling and rampaging to seize the possessions of the wealthy who drive by in their luxury. And likewise it sobers the wealthy so that they dole out something to charity.

What kind of a “God” is this who punishes people without telling them why? Is He too indifferent to rectify injustice? And try as he may to forget it, the millionaire also cannot repress the insistent conviction of injustice. He knows he doesn’t deserve his luxury. He will wake up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat from the horror of a nightmare. At any moment he could lose all he has.

But *fate* appears to solve the problem of unmerited suffering. There must be scales in which our good deeds or bad deeds are weighed. If a man who is now good suffers, the only possible reason must be that he did bad deeds in a formerly, for which he must now pay. Suffering is always punishment.

However, there is another proposed solution to the problem of unmerited suffering, but it makes even less sense. This only other possible solution is to declare that evil is unreal; it may *seem* real to humans but it cannot *be* real to God. This is Christian Science solution.

The deepest inwrought principles of human nature, an insistent yearning of all human hearts, is the desire for forgiveness. But there is no possibility for forgiveness in *fate*, because unexplained suffering is punishment for sins of the past. The retribution is inexorable, like the ocean’s tide. Against this tide stands the solid rock of human nature worldwide which knows heart yearnings that cannot be overthrown forever. We long for forgiveness as surely as the hart pants after the water-brook. God has implanted this yearning deep in our souls. It is a longing that must be satisfied; as well might God implant thirst within us, yet deny us water, or implant hunger in us and deny us food. The cry of the ancient Psalmist is as modern as tomorrow’s newspaper:

Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O LORD.
Lord, hear my voice: let thine ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications.
If thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities,
O Lord, who shall stand?
But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou
mayest
be feared [reverenced].—Psalm 130:1-4.

The truth of forgiveness is not a mere pardon, a blinking of the divine eye which excuses sin. God’s forgiveness is better news than that. It is a taking

away of the sin, so that the sinner will not want to do the evil again. Such forgiveness includes redemption. It delivers from the oppressive guilt of sin. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). The result is joy that sets the heart singing. There is a *fated* burden that is oppressive. There must be justice. Every credit entry on the books cries out to be balanced by a debit entry. Our bad deeds or sins do demand punishment.

But the Bible answer to *fate* is that Christ has borne that punishment for the sins of the world. If any human being takes that punishment back upon himself he is taking something that is no longer rightfully his! That would be like a hitchiker walking on the road with a heavy burden who was offered a lift by a kind driver. But instead of setting his backpack down, the traveler continued to hold it. "Take a rest. Set your heavy burden down," says the driver. "Oh, I thought it was kindness enough for you to give *me* a lift; I could not expect you to carry my burden also!"

Jesus "gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil world, according to the will of God and our Father" (Gal. 1:4). We must let Him carry the burden.

If you give an agreed-upon sum for an item at the store, the cashier must hand over the item to you. He no longer has a right to keep it. So you no longer have the right to keep your sins, or even to retain their punishment. They belong to Jesus, who

bought them by His sacrifice. This is the meaning of Christ's redemption.

Every credit entry in life which we enjoy, every smile, every laugh, every sunlit moment of happiness, has already been balanced by a debit entry in the sufferings of Christ. "Surely He hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows" (Isa. 53:4). The Good News of Jesus and *fate* are as opposite as day and night. Why then does so much unmerited suffering go on and on in this world?

The Bible recognizes the reality of our systemic identity with the entire human race. Suffering is the *consequence* of sin, but not the *punishment* for sin. The entire human race is one body; and suffering is the common lot of the body. According to the Bible, the entire human race is "Adam," an extended family, one person, just as all the cells of our body constitute one person. One bloodstream flows through them all, one nervous system joins them all.

Therefore the pain one member of the body feels, all the members feel. An infected mosquito injects a finger with a malarial parasite. In ten days, it is not the mere finger that feels the fever the entire body does. This is a *system-wide disease*, a disease pertaining to the entire body. "Whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it" (1 Cor. 12:26). If one member of the body sins, all the members share a common suffering as the result. "By one man [Adam] sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned" (Rom. 5:12).

All mountain lions are by nature man-eaters, although very few ever get the taste of human flesh. If any mountain lion becomes too old or arthritic to chase his normal prey, when he is hungry enough he will not hesitate to eat a human being if he can.

So all humans share a common sinful nature; apart from the grace of a Saviour from sin, they will surely succumb to temptation when the pressure becomes strong enough. This is the common sin of all humanity, and its presence in our souls cries out for some kind of justice in order to balance the account.

That justice is certain. God cannot change His law. Sin brings its own penalty—death. Not the cessation of life which we now call “death” (the Bible calls that “sleep”). The real thing is the “second death,” the total conscious end of all hope, the total realization of ultimate condemnation. Christ has met that claim of justice: He has paid the penalty for that common sin of humanity in His death on His cross. He has borne the total justice for the world. Therefore there can be no further penalty of eternal death for any sinner unless he chooses to reject the forgiveness given him by the great Sin-bearer. Many do reject it, but it is totally unnecessary.

Because the only penalty for sin is death, the “second death,” suffering cannot also be the punishment for sin. God has never said that “the wages of sin is suffering.” He said, “The wages of sin is *death*” (Rom. 6:23). This is the reason why the suffering we humans endure is not the *punishment* for sin, but it is the *consequence* of sin.

The entire body feels the malarial fever which came from the little finger being infected with the parasite. The disease is a *consequence* of the infection, not *punishment* for it. Someone may say, “This is not just, that the entire body must suffer because of what happened to the little finger!” What makes it just is that the body is one unit, sharing a common bloodstream.

The Bible teaches the truth that all human beings share a common weakness. All “alike have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 6:23, NEB). “There is none righteous, not, not one” (vs. 10). No one of us can claim that he is *within* more righteous than someone else.

Like the lion’s man-eating nature, we all share the common nature of sin with all its attendant evil, a common corporate guilt. If we do not find ourselves in jail like the common criminal, we can take no proud credit to ourselves. We thank the grace of a Saviour who has saved us from the potential for evil that is in ourselves as much as in anybody. That potential can flare out in crime given the right circumstances. None of us knows what he or she *could* do if the pressure were great enough. “Let him [or her] that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12).

Our suffering is the common lot of humanity. The stomach does not complain because it feels the malarial fever introduced via the finger. Neither can we complain because we share the common suffering of humanity. Both good and bad people have accidents; both good and bad get cancer; both

good and bad suffer poverty. But love lightens the burden!

Christ did no sin; yet He suffered the vilest abuse and pain, even our “second death.” He is called “the Prince of sufferers.” But what He suffered is what we would have suffered, had He not suffered it in our stead:

“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. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way: and the LORD hath laid on him *the iniquity of us all*” (Isa. 53:4-6). This could well be translated into modern speech: “The LORD hath laid on Him the *fate* of us all.”

God has not been reposing in sublime indifference, feeling nothing of our woe. The idea which declares that evil is unreal, that God cannot feel it, is contradicted in the Bible. God *does* feel evil. He is infinitely disturbed by it, precisely because He Himself is not evil. He is so much concerned about it that He plunged into the sea of human sin to take upon Himself its full penalty, and thus to cleanse the tide of humanity that will accept His salvation.

Then is there any meaning to the sufferings we still endure? Yes, much. Paul calls upon those who love truth to “rejoice in my sufferings, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body’s sake” (Col. 1:24).

When the eye of faith looks upon the sufferings of Christ, immediately we realize a kinship with Him;

we become one with Him; we “know him . . . and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto his death” (Phil. 3:10). Our sufferings are in “fellowship” with His sufferings in that we share with Him the privilege of demonstrating the victory of faith over evil. None is in vain. The true disciple must share the life of his Master. Jesus said, “Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20).

That persecution is very difficult for us to bear if we think that it is *God* who inflicts it. But if we know that the agent is *Satan*, we can endure it joyfully because we realize a “fellowship” with Christ. It is no longer pointless, meaningless suffering. If we were transported to Heaven without our having experienced suffering in this life, we would feel miserably out of place in the presence of Jesus, who has had to endure so much suffering on our account. Humans who want to have fellowship with God on any level must also have fellowship with Him in suffering. Only then will they be able to appreciate His gift of salvation.

The Book of Job makes plain the redemptive glory that follows the “fellowship of Christ’s sufferings.” God did not inflict suffering on Job; *Satan did*. But Job did not know this. In his innocence he naturally assumed that it was God who was torturing him for some mysterious, unknown sin. Could it be from his past?

From his point of view, it was only right to protest against what he perceived to be gross injustice.

And God was not angry with Him for protesting. In fact, He loved for him to do so! He is not pleased for us to whimper in a cringing, submission to injustice.

Job complained vigorously: “O earth, cover not thou my blood, and let my cry have no place” (Job 16:18). His challenge to “God” is righteous as he innocently perceives what naturally looks to him like *God’s* injustice, when in reality it was Satan’s.

It is wrong for human beings to submit to Satan’s injustice without crying out in protest. The drama of Job is of thrilling interest, for we see ourselves in the wretched victim sitting on his dung heap, scraping his sores, enduring his anguish, all the while knowing nothing of the cosmic struggle between God and Satan going on behind the curtain of the stage. Job imagines that this is *God* who is treating him so unfairly. He can think of no sin he has committed that remotely deserves this kind of punishment! Listen to his cry:

I can’t be quiet!

I am angry and bitter.

I have to speak. . . .

Are You harmed by my sin, You Jailer?

Why use me for Your target practice? . . .

Can’t You ever forgive my sin?—Job 7:11, 20, 21

God . . . sends storms to batter and bruise me
without any reason at all. . . .

I am innocent and faithful. . . .

Nothing matters, innocent or guilty,

God will destroy us. . . .

God gave the world to the wicked.

He made all the judges blind.

And if God didn’t do it, who did?—Job 9:17, 20, 22, 24

What Job did not know is that God had nothing to do with it. But nevertheless the honor of God was involved in Job’s endurance, for Satan had challenged God, “Would Job worship You if he got nothing out of it? . . . Suppose You take away everything he has—he will curse You to Your face!” (Job 1:9, 11)

If God had said, “I am afraid you are right, Satan; I must not permit you to test Job,” Satan would have won his victory, and he would have trumpeted all over God’s vast universe that God is a coward, that no one really loves Him, and that He does not really trust any human being to honor Him. The world would have been given over *completely* to the evil one.

The only way to save the world was to permit Satan to test man, with Job being a representative man, a type of Christ to come. Job faithfully endured the loss of his family and all his possessions without cursing God.

Satan again challenged God, claiming that the test was not severe enough. “Now suppose You hurt his body he will curse You to Your face!” Again God is forced to permit His faithful servant to endure a still more painful test. “All right, he is in your power, but you are not to kill him. Then Satan left the LORD’S presence and made sores break out all over Job’s body. Job went and sat by the rubbish heap and took a piece of broken pottery to scrape his sores” (Job 2:5-8).

Job had not sinned in his lifetime in any way to deserve such torture. He was quite right to protest against his fate; the only problem was he did not know *to whom he should protest*.

There is a link that binds Job on his dung heap with Jesus on His cross. Jesus too suffered innocently; He too was scourged by Satan. If the ancient Jews had understood the Book of Job they would never have yielded themselves to be Satan's agents in crucifying their Lord of glory as they did.

Job represents all of us as we "fill up that which is behind of the sufferings of Christ." Someday we shall treasure the experiences that now we lament; and even in this life, we find that suffering borne in the spirit of Jesus brings a glorious reward of tenderness of heart, of compassion for others, of Christlike love, of patient and helpful wisdom. We begin to share the burden that Jesus feels, the purpose to help lighten others' suffering, and thus to glorify God. The sufferer who believes the Good News of Jesus knows he is not being punished for sins of a distant past or sins of his present life. Jesus was punished in his *stead*.

He knows rather a comforting truth: like John the Baptist suffering innocently in King Herod's dark dungeon, he realizes that "of all the gifts that Heaven can bestow upon men and women, fellowship with Christ in His sufferings is the most weighty trust, and the highest honor."² This faith lightens the heavy burden of suffering. It sweetens the bitter cup. The sufferer no longer suffers alone.

He or she is joined by this faith in a "yoke" with Jesus, and because He bears the weight, the "yoke" becomes "easy" and the "burden" becomes "light" for the sufferer. He knows that he is no longer a nameless impersonal victim of mysterious *Karma*, but an important link in the chain that Heaven has let down to earth to save the lost. He is a Very Important Person.

One could respond, "Yes, it makes sense; Jesus has taken our *fate*; there is personal freedom and release in His Good News. But still the world is full of injustice, cruelty, and pointless suffering. Very few people understand or believe this Good News. What hope is there for us?" The solution is to spread abroad the knowledge of the Good News!

This is why Jesus said, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth." "Go throughout the whole world and preach the gospel to all mankind" (Matt. 28:18; Mark 16:15, GNB). That "authority" is encouraging, for light is stronger than darkness, love is stronger than hatred, grace is stronger than sin, kindness is stronger than cruelty, and Good News is stronger than Bad News. God's plan for the future is for the world to be lightened with the glory of Jesus and His love for the human race. Many, far more than we now imagine, will respond.

² Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 224.