

The Fellowship of Perfection

The Stepping Stone of Suffering

By Steve Pruitt

In his book "Tortured for Christ," Richard Wurmbrand shares the horrifying experiences of 14 years in Communists prisons. Wurmbrand lived in Rumanian when it was occupied by the communists in 1945 and became a prominent leader in the underground church. He was arrested in 1948 and spent the first three years of his incarceration in solitary confinement. He saw no one other than his torturers.

Wurmbrand writes, "The tortures and brutality continued without interruption. When I lost consciousness or became too dazed to give the torturers any further hopes of confessions, I would be returned to my cell. There I would lie, untended and half dead, to regain a little strength so they could work on me again. Many died at this stage, but somehow my strength always managed to come back. In the ensuing years, in several different prisons, they broke four vertebrae in my back, and many other bones. They carved me in a dozen places. They burned and cut eighteen holes in my body." (*Tortured for Christ*; page 41)

The Apostle Paul wrote, *Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, **and the fellowship of His sufferings**, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.* (Philippians 3:8-11)

One reason Paul gave for counting all things loss is so that he would know the fellowship of Christ's sufferings. The Greek word used in this verse for fellowship means partnership or participation, social intercourse, benefaction, to communicate, communion or distribution. The Greek word for sufferings used in this verse means something undergone such as a hardship or pain; an emotion or influence, affection, affliction or motion. So Paul was basically saying that he wanted to know (feel, be aware of, understand, have knowledge of) the hardship and pain of Christ and wanted to participate in that hardship and pain by becoming a partner with Christ.

Paul understood that to share in the sufferings of Christ was the only way to share in the life of Christ. And he considered the life of Christ more precious than his own. For Paul suffering was a step in being perfected into Christ. The writer of Hebrews tells us that even Christ himself was made perfect in suffering.

But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone. For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings.

Hebrews 2:9-10

You might ask; "How was Jesus made perfect through sufferings?" Jesus was sinless; he was born sinless and never committed sin. It wasn't as if Jesus was sinful before the suffering and holy afterwards. The message being portrayed is that Jesus' mission was made perfect through suffering. Had Jesus not suffered he would not have been fully qualified to be the savior. Jesus was at the ever beckoning call of the Father; his purpose was to do the will of the Father which led him down a road of suffering. His suffering and death made him a perfect (complete) savior and a perfect example of how we should suffer in doing the will of the Father.

In much the same way we are made perfect through suffering. Our life's mission is the same as Christ's in this way: we are created to obey the Father's will in fulfilling his kingdom purposes to bring glory to his name. When we consider the life of Christ more precious than our own we will joyously count all things lost to partner with him in suffering and by so doing be conformed into his image.

Paul wrote in Romans 8:29, *For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.* Suffering is one way God has chosen for us to be conformed into the image of his son and thus become mature (perfect) in the faith. Jesus is then glorified as the firstborn among many brethren.

Peter wrote that if anyone suffers as a Christian he should not be ashamed but glorify God (1 Peter 4:16). Jesus is glorified in our suffering not only by us taking on his character but also by the fact that we found him worthy enough for which to suffer. It was the pleasure of Christ to suffer that the Father might be glorified in him making him the perfect savior. It must be our pleasure to suffer for him that he might be glorified in us. Doing so will lead to the perfection or maturity of our faith.

Not only was Jesus made perfect through suffering, he also learned obedience through suffering. Again we might ask, "Was Jesus ever disobedient?" Jesus knew the meaning of obedience; he didn't have to suffer to learn it. He didn't possess a disposition of rebellion toward the Father; his will didn't have to be subdued because of disobedience. Jesus chose to learn by experience what it meant to be obedient in suffering and suffered for his obedience.

To mature as Christians we must learn to walk in obedience to the Father. Unlike Christ, we have a tendency to want to do things our way. God sometimes uses suffering to bring us back in line with him. The Psalmist wrote, *Before I was afflicted I went astray, But now I keep Your word.* (Psalms 119:67) *It is good for me that I have been afflicted, That I may learn Your statutes.* (Psalms 119:71) You may think it seems cruel to bring suffering in ones life to teach obedience, but it is one of the most loving things the Father does.

The Father knows that the best thing for us is to be in the center of his will because he is the best thing in the universe. No where else will we be more complete than when we are in full communion with him. To withhold anything from us that would bring me to completeness would not be loving on the Father's part.

We must also understand that the Father is more interested in his glory than our comfort. The ultimate purpose for our suffering is to glorify the Father. If our obedience brings about suffering for his glory then suffering has fulfilled that purpose. We must experience what it means to be obedient in suffering if we want to be made perfect; that was the mind of Christ.

Peter wrote, *Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.* (1 Peter 4:1-2) Did Jesus cease from sin by suffering in the flesh? The obvious answer is no. We have already established that he was born sinless and led a sinless life. What Jesus did do was make a way for sin to be forgiven making it possible for man to live for the will of God instead of living for his own fleshly desires. God uses suffering as a beacon to lure us away from pursuing the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life. Suffering directs us toward the will of God and away from ours.

Christ's sufferings in the flesh were many including ridicule, slander, hatred, prejudice, persecution, loneliness, temptation, physical pain and death. We too may suffer all or some of these if we arm ourselves with the same mind of Christ. It is in these kinds of sufferings we live out the mind of Christ by living for the will of the Father. It is through suffering that we are made perfect and complete.

The Greek word Peter uses for cease means to stop, restrain, quit, desist, and come to an end. Jesus suffering of death made it possible for man to live sinless. For

us to mature as Christians we must stop sinning. We stop sinning when we learn to walk by the Spirit and not the flesh; in doing so we fulfill the will of God. We may never reach absolute perfection in this life, but our goal is to live a life worthy of our calling.

Suffering is a tool that chisels us to perfection and maneuvers us from one stream of glory to another. Paul understood that when he said, *For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.* (Romans 8:18) That is why he could suffer the loss of all things and count them as rubbish to join in partnership with the sufferings of Christ. The cost of the suffering is worth the reward.

But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you.

1 Peter 5:10

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