

## Hallelujah! Discipleship Hurts

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Some statements in the Bible appear to conflict with common sense *at first*. For example, the apostle James wrote, "**Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.**" (James 1:2-4) Through the years, I have reflected on these words and it seems as though James said, "Hallelujah! Discipleship hurts. Enjoy it! Get more of it! Be happy when you suffer!"

OK, this paraphrase may be too liberal, but the following question is worth thoughtful consideration. How should life and its trials be viewed? The carnal view is this: Pain is evil and should be avoided at all costs. Pleasure is divine and the pursuit of happiness should be our first priority. The spiritual view is different. God indicates that He gave life to humanity to fulfill a specific purpose. (Jeremiah 1:5; Isaiah 44:28; Job 10:9-12) Does God use trials and perplexities (even if some of them are self-inflicted) to perfect us and train us for eternal assignments?

Or, were we conceived to pursue whatever dreams and ambitions we might desire? Do we own the life within us or did God *loan* it to us? Do we actually own houses and lands or do these things really belong to God? Should the object of life be the pursuit of happiness or should we, like Moses, refuse the pleasures of sin so we might serve God throughout eternity? (Hebrews 11:24-26)

Our response to these questions depends upon the orientation of our heart. If our heart is predominantly carnal (self-centered), our view of life, material possessions, and ambitions will be ego-centric. If our heart is predominantly spiritual (God-centered), our view of life, material possessions, and ambitions will be theo-centric. *The point is that the heart tells the head how life is to be understood.*

When a person has a theo-centric view of life the words of James make sense! James said, "**Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.**" When we receive a spiritual heart, the indwelling fullness of the Holy Spirit gives us joy and peace. The trials and tests that come our way become *important events* through which God purifies our love for Him and our neighbors.

Through fiery trials He refines His children for greater service. This is why James wrote, "consider it pure joy when your faith is tested. . . ." Human beings suffer because of sin, but *God does not permit suffering to occur without extracting something beneficial*. For example, God has used Job's suffering numerous times to reveal important truths for succeeding generations.

God feels our pain. Our Father understands our feelings and through our suffering, He reveals Himself to us in ways we never thought possible. Here are five points about suffering you may

want to consider:

1. - God monitors the life and situation of each person each day. Matthew 10:29-31 **"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."**
2. - God trains, tests and then exalts those who endure His discipline. Hebrews 12:10 **"Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness."** Remember the story of Daniel and the lion's den? Daniel was trained, tested and then exalted.
3. - God understands our carnal nature. He knows how easy it is for us to set our affections on the temporal tinsel of this world. Suffering reminds us that material things are temporary. 1 John 2:15-17 **"Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever."**
4. - God knows there is unending hostility between His children and the devil's children. God also knows that His children cannot explain spiritual things to people who do not have spiritual understanding. 1 Corinthians 2:14 **"The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned."** Therefore, Jesus made the following promise. (Matthew 10:17-20)  
  
**"Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you."**
5. - Jesus purifies His disciples through fiery trials so the uninformed might see His love reflected through the pure gold of His disciple's characters. 1 Peter 1:6,7 **"In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."**

When these five elements are brought together, a spiritual heart sees suffering in a different light. This is why James said, "count it pure joy when you face trials and perplexities." The believer knows that God uses suffering to perfect us for greater service and intimacy with God brings joy! For example, Paul and Silas were beaten and put in prison for their testimony, but they sang for joy at midnight! (Acts 16:25) The believer also knows that God uses the suffering of His saints to bring salvation to others. (Philippians 1:27-30)

For example, God used the sufferings of Jesus to bring salvation to us and He was highly rewarded for His humble submission to death. **"During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek."** (Hebrews 5:7-10)

After considering these thoughts on suffering, you can appreciate the words of Jesus to the churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia. The members of both churches were suffering for their faith when Jesus sent them a copy of the book of Revelation.

## The Church At Smyrna

"To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died [for you] **and came to life again. I know your afflictions and your poverty – yet you are rich** [in the two things that really count: love and faith]! **I know the slander** [lies and distortions] **of those who say they are Jews** [my people] **and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer** [for I am with you]. **I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer** [deadly] **persecution for ten days** [by the emperor]. **Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of [eternal] life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes** [the fear of losing this life] **will not be hurt at all by the second death.**" (Revelation 2:8-11, insertions mine)

## There are several points in this message that invite discussion, but we will examine three:

1. - Early Christians (remember, God gave this message to the church at Smyrna in A.D. 95) saw themselves as the Israel of God which had been called out of apostate Israel. (James 1:1; 2:1; Ephesians 2; Romans 11:25) Jesus confirmed this distinction by calling one group of people in Smyrna "the *synagogue* of Satan" and another group "the *church* in Smyrna." A church consists of believers in Christ whereas a synagogue consists of believers in Jehovah. Jesus well understood the conflict between Christianity and Judaism for the Jewish authorities had condemned Him to death. Jesus said, "I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan."

Conflict in Smyrna between Jewish converts and Gentile Christians was intense because Christianity declared Judaism obsolete. Jewish converts found it hard to accept that Jesus had terminated their whole religious system *and culture*. The difference in religious perspective was significant. Christians did not have a high priest on Earth. They did not need to perform animal sacrifices, attend feasts, participate in temple services, continue the rite of circumcision, or observe *anything* that Judaism offered.

This freedom from Judaism was an endless source of conflict in Smyrna because Jewish

converts wanted to observe Jewish traditions and Gentile converts refused to go along. (Of course, Gentiles had religious baggage, too.) This conflict was so great during the first century A.D. that God raised up a brilliant student (the apostle Paul) to address this controversy!

2. - Jesus identified Himself to the church at Smyrna as **"the First and the Last, who died and came to life again."** Jesus described Himself with this language because many martyrs would die for His sake in the church at Smyrna. In A.D. 95, Christianity was an illegal religion in some parts of the Roman empire. The evil emperor Domitian (A.D. 81-96) put many Christians to death before he was murdered. Then, Nerva (A.D. 96-98) ascended to Domitians' throne, but he soon died within two years of illness.

Then, Trajan (A.D. 98-117) came to power and even though he did not actively seek out Christians to kill them, he mandated that if a Christian should be found, he must be arrested and executed unless he immediately renounced his faith. The ten days of persecution mentioned by Jesus evidently refers to an upcoming purge of Smyrna.

Loyalty tests and purges were frequently used by Roman governors to maintain control over their subjects, for no governor wanted to be charged with treason against Caesar and lose his head. Jesus warned the Christians in Smyrna of this upcoming purge and He encouraged them to remain faithful "even to the point of death" because those put to death for His sake would, like Him, come to life again.

3. - Jesus also added, **"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death."** There is a hidden message in this phrase. Overcoming the fear of torture and death is not a normal human instinct.

We instinctively do everything possible to protect ourselves. The hidden message that comes through the Spirit is this: God will give a martyr's courage when a martyr's courage is required. In other words, overcoming the fear of death is possible through God's grace because God's gives us power over our fears!

So, Jesus said, "be firm in your stand for truth and remain loyal to me (even to the point of death) and you will not be hurt at all by the second death." This is good news because the wicked will not receive grace to overcome their fear of the second death! The wicked will be resurrected to receive God's judgment and ultimately annihilated. This coming event is the second death. (Revelation 20:15)

## **The Church At Philadelphia**

We also need to examine the message to the church at Philadelphia because they, like the church at Smyrna, were suffering for their faith. **"To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David [e.g., Jesus has control over the world]. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. [Jesus said,] I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open**

**door that no one can shut** [because I am not limited by the rebellion of men]. **I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars – I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth. I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.**" (Revelation 3:7-13, insertions mine)

The church at Philadelphia struggled in a similar way with the synagogue of Satan, just like the church at Smyrna. In fact, the seven churches were beset with all kinds of problems. Ephesus had lost its first love. Pergamum was beguiled with the devil's lies and gnosticism. Thiratira was corrupted with Jezebel's teachings about sexual immorality. Smyrna was hammered by persecution. Philadelphia was weak, but hanging on. Sardis was an active church, but it was spiritually dead, and Laodicia had grown indifferent. As Jesus observed these seven churches, no wonder He was unhappy.

Unfortunately, many Christians distort the message to the church at Philadelphia because they are looking for texts to support their notion of a pre-tribulation rapture, but what Jesus said does not imply a pre-tribulation rapture. Because the church in Philadelphia was weak and suffering from persecution, Jesus told the members at Philadelphia that He had made a way for them to go through their suffering. This is the point of the open door – by His grace they could go *through* this experience and overcome it.

He also told them that He would keep them during the hour of trial that was going to come upon the whole world. Think about this for a moment. Did Jesus offer to protect the people in Philadelphia from the Great Tribulation and allow the other six churches to go through the Great Tribulation? Of course not! Jesus' words have to be understood within their context. They were spoken to the people in Philadelphia in A.D. 95. *Jesus directed His words to them.* He encouraged the weakened members in Philadelphia to hold on to their faith because He would never leave them nor forsake them.

The reason Jesus spoke these words to the church in Philadelphia is twofold. First, they were already hammered by persecution and second, they would be overcome with discouragement after they read John's vision [the book of Revelation] because it predicted even more suffering to come.

Because the church members in Philadelphia were hurting and weak, it is possible that knowledge of the Great Tribulation could cause some members to give up their faith altogether. So, Jesus prepared them for the message in Revelation saying, "**Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth. I am coming soon. Hold**

**on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown."** In other words, Jesus promised to sustain the church at Philadelphia with His strength and not theirs. Jesus encouraged them saying, "Hold on to what you have . . ."

These words are crucial when the fires of persecution are hot. It is human nature to give in or give up if it stops the pain. But, those who overcome will be rewarded beyond their wildest imaginations! Another secret message was given to Philadelphia. Jesus promised to give all over comers a special name tag when they get to Heaven. Jesus said, "**I will write on him the name of my God . . . the name of the city of my God, and I will also write on him my new name**"

This "name tag" will permit its owner to travel anywhere in God's universe with a hundred angels attending. When you receive this name tag, you will be recognized throughout God's universe as a very special person because YOU were trained by the suffering you experienced on Earth for the exalted role that God has given you. Your victory makes you very special to Jesus and He wants everyone to know it, thus, the glorious name tag. Can you say, "Hallelujah! Discipleship hurts?" When viewed from the eternal perspective, I cannot think of anything better than getting this name tag. Can you?

### **Take the quiz: Questions and answers from this article:**

(click question for the answer)

1. What determines our view of pain and suffering – our heart or our head?

***The heart tells the head how to interpret life. (Luke 6:45)***

2. Describe the difference between an ego-centric and Theo-centric life.

***An ego-centric life is self-centered. The theo-centric life is God centered.***

3. Would God permit suffering without extracting something beneficial?

***The book of Job teaches that suffering has purpose. The purpose may be hard to understand at first, but there is purpose and God can bring something beneficial out of suffering. Doesn't the suffering a woman goes through giving birth teach us this lesson? (John 16:21; Hebrews 12:2)***

4. What was promised to the over comers in Smyrna?

***They would not be hurt by the second death.***

5. What was promised to the over comers in Philadelphia?

***A glorious name tag!***

6. When you are discouraged, what helps most: A search and review of God's promises or reciting your problems 10 times to your best friend?

***You know the answer.***