

**ENTERING THE REALM OF
PERPETUAL NIGHT**

Our Tear-Washed Eyes

Why Does God Allow His People to Suffer?

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My otolaryngologist was visibly nervous. He had completed his routine examination of my ears, nose and throat, shuffled papers on his desk, and “harrumphed” a couple of times. Finally, he turned in his chair and said to me, “Mr. Pickering, you have a large mass in your frontal sinuses. It needs immediate attention. I do not feel qualified to handle your case and am referring you to the Chairman of the Division of the Otolaryngology Department at the University of Alabama School of Medicine in Birmingham.” A large mass? At first the significance of this statement did not strike me. Then, I came to realize that he was speaking about a tumor—possibly cancerous—in a most vulnerable place.

Consultation with the doctor in Birmingham proved that he was a very competent surgeon. Biopsy confirmed the presence of a malignant tumor. What should be done? It must be removed very soon. The surgery was complicated and uncommon, requiring the precise coordination of two surgeons, since the tumor lay not only in the frontal sinuses, but next to the brain. God knew the need ahead of time and had placed me in the care of not only the otolaryngologist, but also the Chairman of the Neurological Department at UAB. They had worked together and perfected a procedure for removal of such tumors. After seven hours in surgery, I was taken to the Neurological Intensive Care Unit, where I remained for several days. I thanked God that I was alive, but a long recuperation lay ahead.

Six weeks after the surgery, I began radiation treatments for the purpose of killing any remaining cancer cells. Thirty-five treatments were delivered. (In 1983, when I had a nasal pharynx malignant tumor removed, I had undergone thirty-five radiation treatments.) My head has been attacked seventy times by radiation waves.

Months of recuperation followed. My ministry as Deputation Director of Baptist World Mission was greatly curtailed until I was able to return to the office on a limited basis. The Executive Director, Board of Trustees, and staff at the Mission were very kind to me during these months of limited service.

After several months, I resumed my itinerant preaching schedule. It was good to be in the pulpit again. It is hard

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for a preacher to be away from the pulpit for any length of time.

For about a year and a half, my health improved with relatively few problems. In July 1996, I was teaching pastors in the Moscow School of Theology in Russia when suddenly the sight in my left eye diminished greatly, like a curtain dropping over my eye. Within days, the sight in my left eye was totally gone. I cut short my ministry in Russia and returned home for tests. The doctors determined that the blindness was caused by radiation damage to the optic nerve. The nerve had been killed and thus destroyed the sight in that eye. Treatments were prescribed to try to save the sight in my right eye, but they did not help. On November 8, 1996, while ministering in a pastor's conference in Nebraska, I lost the sight in my right eye as well. Now I am totally blind.

What a shock it was! Here I was, a preacher and writer who for all my ministry had been dependent on the eyesight given me by God. Now I did not have it. No longer would I be able to see the lovely face of my wife. The faces of my children, grandchildren, loved ones, and myriads of Christian friends would remain only in my memory. No more could I enjoy the beautiful and magical tints of a sunrise or sunset. There would be no gazing with wonder at the beauty of God's creation. I had entered a realm of perpetual night.

Perhaps the greatest heartache of all was the inability to read. Since I was just a small boy, I have been an avid reader. Books and magazines of all kinds were a daily source of information, inspiration, and challenge to my mind. Now I was relegated to audio sources rather than visual. What effect would this have on my ministry? I did not know and, admittedly, was fearful. One determination remained to this day—I will serve the Lord in whatever way I can.

Greater burdens immediately fell upon the shoulders of my dear wife. She had to live with a blind man, performing duties she had not faced previously. With what grace, skill, and loving compassion she has done that. I am grateful to God for this wonderful companion upon the road of life.

Yes, I will live my days upon this earth in physical darkness. Isaiah put it well when he said, "For the Lord God will help me; therefore shall I not be confounded: therefore

have I set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be ashamed....Behold, the Lord God will help me....Who is among you that...walketh in darkness and hath no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God" (Isa. 50:7-10).

Why, God? Why?

One day, following my clumsy efforts to get from one place to another in our home, and having gotten lost, my wife had to find me and guide me out of the corner into which I had found myself. We collapsed in each other's arms and wept together in frustration. Through her sobs, Yvonne said, "Why has this happened? Your only desire is to serve the Lord. You are a good man who has helped hundreds of people. There are so many bad people who can see. Why would God permit your blindness?" Some might say spiritual people do not question God. I do not believe this is so. Reading in the annals of Christian saints of all the centuries, I have noted that many of them have gone down into the valley of despair and asked the same question. Centuries ago, a lone figure hung in suffering upon a cruel cross erected outside the walls of Jerusalem. The sun blushed in shame as its Creator went through the agony of death. Out of the midst of that dark hour came the cry from the lips of Jesus of Nazareth, "Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani" (Matt. 27:46). "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Could it be that the eternal Son of God would utter such a cry? In His humanity, suffering as the God-Man upon the cross, the Savior of sinners asked the Father, "Why?" As the eternal God, He well knew the answer; but as the suffering Son of Man, He nevertheless uttered the query. What was the answer? God, in His wisdom and grace, in that dark moment, poured out upon His only begotten Son wrath which only sinners deserved. Jesus became our substitute. God dealt with Him as He should have dealt with us. Christ "became sin for us...that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (II Cor. 5:21). Christians ought ever to remember that God is not removed from the pangs of our suffering. He, too, suffered as He bore our sins. God the Father suffered as He viewed His Son upon the cross. As we walk through life's troublesome and tearful valleys, we meet the "Man of Sorrows" who was "acquainted with grief" (Isa. 53:3).

The Bible is not silent with regard to this question. While God does not explain all of His reasons to us, nor is He obligated to do so, He does give us sufficient light in His Word so we may understand why He allows the righteous to suffer.

Physical sickness is a result of sin. Adam and Eve, the progenitors of the human race, were never sick until after they sinned. They were created by God with perfect bodies and the perfect health that accompanied them. There is no mention made in Scripture of sickness or death until after they had turned their backs on God. Since that awful day in the garden of Eden when “sin entered into the world, and death by sin” (Rom. 5:12), there has been human suffering. No race on earth is exempt from sickness. It is universal. God warned Adam that if he disobeyed His commandments, he would “...surely die” (Gen 2:17). In other words, the human body would be afflicted with various ailments and would finally perish in the grave.

One must be careful in interpretation at this point. This does not mean that every individual human illness is a direct result of some specific individual sin. So-called “faith healers” make much of the fact that individual believers sin against God and thus incur upon themselves physical ailments. It can be true, however. Paul indicated that there were some in the Corinthian church who were walking in the flesh, disobeying God, and coming to the Lord’s table in careless fashion. He then laments, “For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep” (I Cor. 11:30). John also warns about the “sin unto death” (I Jn. 5:16). That is, a believer may continue in rebellion against God to the point at which his life will be taken. This passage brings out the seriousness of sin. However, most sickness that believers suffer arises from the weakness of the human body and natural causes.

Until that great resurrection morning, believers will continue to occupy mortal bodies—bodies that are “sown in weakness” (I Cor. 15:43).

Suffering brings glory to God.

While ministering here on earth, Jesus was approached by messengers from His friend Lazarus. They reported, “Lord...he whom thou lovest is sick” (Jn. 11:3). It seems a contradiction does it not? Jesus truly loved Lazarus, so would He not have exercised His omnipotent power to prevent him from being sick? But He did not. In His own encompassing wisdom, our Lord replied, “The sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby” (Jn. 11:4).

God is often glorified through the physical illness of believers. I Peter 1:7 tells us “That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ.”

Witness the tremendous testimony of great saints of the past and present who have been greatly afflicted and yet, through it all, have brought tremendous glory to their heavenly Father. The young and godly missionary David Brainerd poured out his life for the conversion of Indians in the early uncharted American wilderness. He was seriously ill with tuberculosis and oblivious to his own personal physical needs. Brainerd toiled to preach the Gospel to these native Americans through great physical suffering.

What of the great poet John Milton, who, struck with blindness in the prime of his life, still went on to write epic poems and to serve God in other ways? Who can dispute the fact that Fanny Crosby, blind from early years, brought glory to the God of Heaven through the writing of great hymns, which we still sing today? These could all say with the great apostle Paul, “When I am weak, then am I strong” (II Cor. 12:10). It is more important that God be glorified than that His people be comfortable. Those great biblical heroes mentioned in Hebrews 11, suffering as they did for God, gave glory to Him through their suffering, should we not magnify His name and submit to His will?

Suffering drives the believer to prayer.

The prayer life of many a believer has improved tremendously after the onslaught of physical affliction. Regrettably, we do not always pray as fervently as we ought when we are sailing along under the blue skies of good health. However, when affliction strikes, we immediately turn to our Heavenly Father. Oh, what compelling prayers have been lifted from the hearts of those suffering affliction.

Times of physical affliction propel believers to the throne of grace, there to receive comfort from the gracious Heavenly Father.

Suffering motivates local churches and their leaders to special believing prayer.

The believers at Philippi had heard that Epaphroditus was

sick. So serious was his ailment that Paul describes him as “nigh unto death” (Phil. 2:27). No doubt, much concerted prayer was offered for this great servant of Christ, who “for the work of Christ” did not regard “his life, to supply your lack of service toward me” (Phil. 2:30). When a member of the body of Christ is sick, it seems to bond the other members closer together as they wrestle with God for healing. The concerted prayers of a local church evidence concern for the afflicted member and, at the same time, manifest the people’s oneness in Christ. When one member hurts, all members hurt. “Is any sick among you?” If so, James continues, “let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him...” (James 5:14).

Suffering emphasized the truth that God is sovereign.

Most of us would not choose affliction. We would rather be healthy. However, the choice is not up to us. While we certainly should do all we can to insure good health, it may not always be God’s will for us to have good health. Our blessed Lord, about to enter a vale of sufferings which we cannot begin to understand, prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, “...nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt” (Matt. 26:39). The terrible physical, emotional, and spiritual sufferings endured by the Son of God were included in the will of God for Him. Peter and, no doubt, the other disciples did not relish the thought of their Master going to the cross of suffering. In John 18:11, however, Jesus, resting in the sovereignty of His Father, replied, “The cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?” In other words, it was the will of God for Jesus to suffer. Sometimes it is the will of God for the disciples of Jesus to suffer as well. Let us confess with the Psalmist, “My times are in thy hand (Psa. 31:15). The Psalmist says again, “Our God is in the heavens: he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased” (Psa. 115:3).

In this age, when great emphasis is laid upon man’s rights, abilities, programs, wishes, and aspirations, it is difficult for some to bow to the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. Humanly speaking, we do not like the idea of God being the absolute ruler. We want at least a “piece of the pie.” We want to think of ourselves as autonomous and capable. We must always remember, however, that God is supreme. He guides the universe in all its affairs and also guides our personal lives. For years, I have had posted on the wall of my study a saying received from the

preacher Dr. Robert T. Ketcham. It says: “God is too good to be unkind and too wise to make mistakes.” The little boy was right when he was asked to define God’s omniscience: “God is the only One Who never had to say ‘Oops.’” God has never made a mistake and never will. “He hath done all things well” (Mk. 7:37).

Suffering enables us to more fully appreciate God’s wonderful grace.

The trials, sorrows, and hurts of life throw us more completely upon the unlimited grace of God. Were it not for adversities, we would never be able to understand as fully the marvelous grace dispensed by our Lord. Many scholars feel that the apostle Paul was afflicted with some form of eye disease. The conclusion is based upon the examination of several texts in the New Testament. Whether this was his exact physical problem cannot be stated dogmatically. However, it seems clear that Paul did have a physical ailment that was of concern to him. Paul suffered with a “thorn in the flesh,” which was very possibly some sort of physical affliction. He earnestly besought the Lord three times to remove the thorn (2 Cor. 12:7-8), but God did not do so. This one text would certainly show us that God does not universally heal all sick believers and that it is not God’s will for us to enjoy perpetual health. God’s answer to Paul’s earnest pleadings was this, “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). God, in effect, said to Paul, “I am not going to heal you, but show you how great my grace is and how you may call upon it to live with your affliction.” We are tempted to think that the many trials of life are too great for us, and we cannot possibly go through them successfully. The Lord has brought more upon us than we can bear. This is not true! God’s wonderful, abounding, mighty grace is **sufficient**. There is no one who will be tested above the limits of God’s grace.

Suffering teaches us to walk by faith and to trust God implicitly.

Few of God’s people have ever suffered as did the ancient patriarch Job. How confusing were God’s dealings with him! He said out of his frustration, “Behold, I go forward, but he is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him: On the left hand, where he doth work, but I cannot behold him: he hideth himself on the right hand, that I

cannot see him: but he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold" (Job 23:8-10). In other words, Job searched in vain for the meaning of God's dealings with him. He did not understand what God was doing. Has not this been true of many a believer down through the ages? God does not always explain everything to us. He requires us only to trust Him implicitly. Out of his heartbreak, out of his despair, and out of his weakness, Job cried triumphantly, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him" (Job 13:15). What a confession! What an example of triumphant faith! How could Job make such a statement? Because he knew that whatever God did would be right and he could trust God with the results. Genesis 18:25 asks, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" God never does wrong. He always does right, even if it may not appear so to us. Therefore, we may trust Him with all that we are and have. A young Salvation Army officer received shocking news—he had a dreaded terminal disease. What was his response? Did he question the loving hand of God? Did he do as Job's wife advised, "Dost thou still retain thine integrity? Curse God, and die" (Job 2:9). No! By the power of the Holy Spirit and through the grace of God, he wrote a touching song, the chorus of which declares:

I'm in His hands, I'm in His hands,
Whate're the future holds,
I'm in His hands.
The days I cannot see
Have all been planned for me.
His way is best, you see.
I'm in His hands.

Suffering causes us to look forward eagerly to our future home in Heaven.

Years ago, a liberal scholar proclaimed that fundamental Christians were too preoccupied with "that ridiculous spiritual roof garden in the next world." But I have found twentieth-century Christians give very little thought to a future home in Heaven. We are too busy making money, paying our bills, trying to scramble to the top of the heap, and facing life's challenges in general. Our problem is not being too "other worldly," but being too "present worldly." Our attention is fastened almost solely upon this world, and we give scarcely a thought to the next. Not so with the great saints of old. Abraham, a prosperous businessman, nevertheless "looked for a city that hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Heb.

11:10).

When physical ailments impair the life and ministry of a believer, he inevitably begins to think about that wonderful home God has prepared for him. Perhaps this is one reason why suffering saints have sometimes been among the greatest of saints. Believers with frail and suffering bodies have written great hymns, preached great messages, and produced tremendous devotional literature which has stirred the hearts of believers through the ages.

My dear mother, in her younger years, was an outstanding vocal soloist and thrilled large crowds with her beautiful singing of gospel songs. At the age of 93, she lay dying and, in her suffering, continually spoke of Heaven. One day as my wife and I stood by her bedside, she suddenly burst forth in a now raspy and off-key voice, singing:

Ring the bells of Heaven!
There is joy today
For a soul returning from the wild!
See! The Father meets him
Out upon the way, welcoming
His weary, wand'ring child.

Glory! Glory!
How the angels sing;
Glory! Glory!
How their loud harps ring!
'Tis the ransomed army,
Like a mighty sea,
Pealing forth the anthem of the free!

The vision of suffering saints is lifted from earth to Heaven. They have seen where others do not see. Out of the discomfort and suffering of the oyster comes a beautiful pearl. Out of the suffering of the saint can come precious pearls of blessing. Paul, as busy as he was preaching the Gospel and planting churches, had Heaven on his mind. He looked for that day in which, beyond the pale of sin and death, he would rejoice with the multitudes who had gone on before.

Suffering saints should always remember that God makes no mistakes. Suffering has its purposes. Ira Stamphill, a great gospel song writer, out of deep personal suffering wrote:

He washed my eyes with tears

that I might see.
The broken heart I had,
was good for me.
He tore it all apart,
and looked inside.
He found it full of fear
and foolish pride.
He swept away the things
that made me blind,
And then I saw the clouds
were silver lined.
And now I understand
t'was best for me.
He washed my eyes with tears
that I might see.

ENTERING THE REALM OF ETERNAL LIGHT

As a blind person, I am extremely thankful that someday I will see again. This hope is grounded in the clear promises of the Word of God and flows out of God's marvelous grace and bounty. Our physical afflictions are "but for a moment" (2 Cor. 4:17) and "worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."

In First Corinthians 15, Paul contrasts our present bodies with our future bodies. What a change that will be! Our present bodies mortal! Our future bodies immortal! Our resurrection bodies will be suited to a spiritual existence in the presence of a holy God. They will, no doubt, possess properties of which we are now ignorant and which God does not attempt to explain fully in His Word.

In ecstatic language, John describes the glories of that New Jerusalem, the eternal home of the saints of God. It will be a land in which there is no "death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain" (Rev. 21:4). It will be a place of perfect rest and peace.

Accessibility to that city is guaranteed by the death of the Lord Jesus Christ and one's acceptance of its substitutionary power. It is the "City of the Lamb." Its designation for the Lord Jesus Christ is prominent in Revelation 21 and 22. It reminds us that all who live in that eternal, bright city must be washed in the blood of the

Lamb. They must have placed personal faith in the redemptive work of Christ in their behalf. They must have heeded the cry of John the Baptist, who said, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). There is a popular misconception that all will eventually gain Heaven, that God is such a good God He will not turn anyone away. Such is far from the truth as given in the Word of God. There are strict requirements for entrance into Heaven. "And there shall in no wise enter into it anything that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life" (Rev. 21:27). By virtue of our sin, all men have their names inscribed in the book of death. "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). How does one get his name erased from the book of death and entered into the book of life? "Ye must be born again" (Jn. 3:7). One must be washed in the blood of the Lamb. One must acknowledge himself a sinner before God and humbly receive the only Savior provided for sinners—the Lord Jesus Christ.

I must needs go home
By the way of the cross,
There's no other way but this.
I shall ne'er get sight
Of the gates of light,
If the way of the cross I miss.

That City of Light will be resplendent in divine glory. Each of its gates will be a huge pearl. The streets will be solid gold. The great walls that surround the city will be garnished with precious gems of a thousand hues. It will be the most beautiful city that ever existed. It is a city "which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. 11:10).

The greatest sight in Heaven, however, will not be the streets of gold or the gates of pearl, or any other material thing, but the glorious Lamb of God. I am very conscious of the fact that as a blind person, I will never again see anything beautiful upon earth. One thing is

sure—the next sight I see will be the face of the One Who died for me. John says of Heaven: "...the Lamb shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him: And they shall see his face" (Rev. 22:3-4).

The Bride eyes not her garment,
But her dear bridegroom's face.
I will not gaze at glory,

OUR TEAR-WASHED EYES

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