

# What Is God Doing To Us In Our Present Suffering?

by Ron R. Ritchie

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Last week was a very strange week for many among us, especially those involved in the Columbia Prison Ministry. It seems that strange things began happening about three weeks ago, when Kathy Woodhall, the wife of one of the team leaders, Ed Woodhall, suffered a knee injury that will require surgery this week. Because of that, Ed wondered whether he should go to Columbia. Then last Sunday, another team leader, Carl Gallivan, told me that his son John had to go into the hospital because of intestinal problems, so Carl was not sure that he could go either. When Ed heard this, he said he would definitely go and head the team, but then Carl called and said that things seemed to be going all right with his son and he could go. But within a couple of days, his plan had to be scrapped because his whole family became sick with a virus. Kathy's family offered to look after her, so Ed changed his plan again and decided to go and head the team. That evening he went out to jog and a truck ran him off the road, forcing him into the side, where he stepped in a pothole and sprained his ankle. Now both team leaders were unable to go on the trip.

There was much personal struggle involved over this turn of events. The trip had been planned for a long time, and the team really wanted to go to Columbia and minister down there. Both Ed and Carl telephoned me, wondering what in the world God was doing and what we should do about it. Finally, they called the prison team leaders in Columbia, Don and Georgie Rendle, only to find that Georgie was very sick and would be unable to participate in the ministry. Besides, Don told Ed that two of their leaders were in Rome and would be there for four months. Further, Ed learned that Colombian guerillas have threatened to kill five Americans for every Colombian native who was sent for trial on drug charges to the United States. At this stage, I hardly need to say that they postponed the trip until February.

What a strange week! Here was a group of people who had planned and prayed about this ministry. They were seeking to do good in the prisons of Columbia, and then all these strange things began happening. According to the Scriptures, however, everything that happened to them was perfectly normal. All of these apparent misfortunes only served to draw the entire team closer to the Lord and closer together. Everything was on schedule. The team members were participating in suffering for Christ's sake, because of their desire to do what was right for Jesus Christ--their desire to do what was pleasing to God.

Peter echoes this sentiment in his first letter, written to the Christians in Asia Minor in 64 A.D. His flock was undergoing tremendous political, social and spiritual suffering, and the apostle urged them to hang in there, despite all these struggles. From the opening verse of the letter through 2:10, he shared with them that they were "born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." Then in 2:11 through 4:11, he encouraged his readers to live as aliens and strangers on earth until Christ returned. In 4:12-19, he wrote on how they were sharing in the sufferings of Christ. They were to keep in mind the fact that Jesus was coming again--that "the end of all things was at hand,"--so they should have a lifestyle of prayer and of service.

But the Christians in Asia Minor struggled with what they perceived to be a deeper issue, and that was that although they were God's children seeking to do what was right, they seemed to be persecuted on every hand, while the wicked seemed to prosper. Peter responds by saying that God was not punishing them; God was not against them and angry with them. Rather, He was doing two radically different things in their present suffering: He was testing their faith, and He was judging His household.

What is God doing to us in our present suffering? Let us look at the first part of the apostle's answer, given in

4:12-16.

## He is testing our faith

**Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that at the revelation of his glory, you may rejoice with exultation. For if you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. By no means let any of you suffer as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; but if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God.**

Peter addresses these Christians as "Beloved," dearly loved ones. Here is a shepherd speaking to a group of aliens and strangers. In spite of the fact that the world hated them, they should be aware that God loved them and was constantly with them. "Don't be surprised," he tells them, "at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you." These Christians were a mixed group of Jews and Gentiles. The Jews among them would not have been surprised at the "fiery ordeal"; that was part of their history. In fact, it seems the whole history of the Jewish nation is one long fiery ordeal. In a recent *Time* magazine, Rabbi A.M. Schindler, President of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, is quoted as saying, "We Jews are not just a minority in this country; we are a minority with a history. We suffered greatly in our wandering across the globe. We are subject to continuous exile, religious conversion, economic appropriations, legal persecutions, anti-Jewish riots and genocide." So the Jews among the group to whom Peter was writing would not be surprised at the "fiery ordeal."

But the Gentiles who had given their lives to Jesus, who were excited about the power of the Holy Spirit working among them, thought it rather strange that they too were now suffering because of their Christianity. To that, the apostle says that it's not strange at all. However, the "fiery ordeals," the burnings and the refining fires were confusing to the Gentiles for the following reason. These people were living under the rule of Rome, which had a polytheistic religious policy that tolerated some 1000 foreign forms of religious expression. They knew that Rome tolerated all kinds of religions--from Judaism to the mystery religions to the state religion which worshiped Caesar as God--so they wondered why they, as Christians, were being persecuted in political, social and personal ways. Speaking of Christianity in his "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire," Edward Gibbons points out that Christians dissolved the sacred ties of custom and education, violated the religious institutions of their country, despised tradition and the sacred truths of the fathers, and refused to hold communion with the gods of Rome, of the empire, and of mankind; thus the people of Rome held that Christians were atheists, as the Romans could not understand the concept of one God. So the Christians came under what Peter calls "fiery ordeals" for these religious problems, as well as for social and personal reasons.

Here Peter explains that these ordeals are not to be considered negative, but rather that they are for the good of Christians. The ordeals are being used to purify their lives, as fire is placed under a crucible filled with gold ore to extract the gold. When God, our Goldsmith, turns up the heat in the Christian's life, all of the impurities rise to the surface and are scraped off. Further, God will continue to raise the heat and scoop off the impurities until He can look into the crucible of the Christian's life and see a perfect reflection of Himself. So, Peter says, don't be surprised; don't think it strange when fiery ordeals come upon you for your testing, for you are beloved of God, and the heat is just the right amount in your maturing process. All is on schedule. All is normal

I had always hoped that God would turn up the heat high enough in my own life just once and get it all over with, but I have discovered that as I grow in Christ, my more subtle impurities need to be dealt with. It was one thing to lie openly when I was young in the Lord, to cheat openly and to curse openly and ask forgiveness from God, but now I notice I can get really subtle in these areas. My outward actions may look all right, but inwardly I can hear God saying, "We need to turn up the heat a little." God wants me to reflect the very image of His character, and He will keep raising the heat until all of my spiritual impurities rise to the top and are scooped off. That is why Peter can say in the opening verses of this letter, "In this you greatly rejoice, even though now, for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold

which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:6-7).

Christians are going somewhere; thus they must daily face the process of maturing. But that maturing takes heat, so that when they arrive at their destination, they will be more conformed to the image of Christ. In my own life, I both hate and love that process. I hate the heat, but I love the results. And the thing I hate most is when people say to me, "I haven't seen you in two years, but you certainly have changed." I thought I was doing fine two years ago! Older Christians, however, are really kind. You know that they know just about everything about you, but they're too kind to talk to you about it. When they see in you something they really like however, which is Christ in you, they compliment you on your spiritual growth. When they do that, you know that Christ is really working in you. The heat is being turned on and you are maturing.

Peter goes on to develop three categories of "fiery ordeals." "But to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation." The first category is "the sufferings of Christ." Peter says that Christians share in those sufferings. Jesus suffered emotionally, physically and spiritually while He was on this earth, not because He had done anything wrong, but because He desired to do righteous deeds in an evil society. Jesus was hated because His righteousness showed up all the evil around Him; the light that He was illuminated the darkness of the world. When Christians are walking in righteousness, they have a similar effect upon society--their good deeds show up the evil and the perverseness of society, so that they are confronted with persecution.

Jesus suffered *emotionally* in that "He came unto His own, and those who were his own did not receive Him" (John 1:11). He was "despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3). He told His disciples, "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. But because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world; therefore the world hates you. Remember the word I said to you, "A slave is not greater than his master." If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:18-20). That is how Jesus suffered emotionally.

He suffered *spiritually* when He cried from His Shepherd's heart, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not have it!" (Luke 13:34). He suffered spiritually on the cross when He realized that He was now separated from God because God had laid all the sins of humanity upon Him. "Surely our griefs He Himself bore and our sorrows He carried" (Isaiah 53:4). "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46). That is when Jesus experienced and understood what Christians experience before they come to Christ--their separation from God. That is why all who have not come to believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ live with a feeling of emptiness. No matter how well things seem to be going externally in their lives, inside they live with a constant feeling of emptiness. Jesus experienced that feeling at the cross; the perfect Lamb of God felt the emptiness of separation from His Father.

And Jesus suffered *physically*. "He was pierced through for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5). "He was cut off from the land of the living, for the transgressions of my people to whom the stroke was due" (Isaiah 53:8). Hebrews 9:26 says, "He put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself."

Our Lord suffered in those three ways for our sake. If we are going to follow Him, we must expect to share in His suffering also, because by the power of the Holy Spirit, we will seek to do deeds of righteousness in our own communities, and those deeds will be greatly misunderstood many times. Paul wrote in Philippians 3:10, "That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His suffering, being conformed to His death." Jesus Himself said, "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it, and whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel shall save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?" We remember the gospel story of Lazarus and the rich man. He went to hell, while Lazarus went to be with Abraham in heaven. The rich man implored Abraham to have Lazarus bring him a tiny sip of water to quench his thirst, but because of the great

gulf between them, that could not be done. Then the rich man pleaded that Lazarus be allowed to visit his brothers and warn them, but the answer was no, they had Moses and the prophets; if they did not believe them, they would not believe Lazarus returned from the dead. Every time I read that account, I realize that the rich man is still in hell today, in 1984. All the years that have passed since that incident occurred, he has been there, waiting for the day of judgment.

That is one reason why we should take seriously the Lord's words, "Whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel shall save it." If you want to gain the crown, you must first take up the cross. The reward comes later, although we all feel like jumping the gun and asking for our prize in the here and now. But the bottom line in allowing Jesus Christ to become our Lord and Savior is that our life is no longer our own. We are servants of Christ seeking to do His will for righteousness' sake. At times we will undergo unjust emotional, spiritual and physical suffering for His sake, but we must not think that is strange. As we share in the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing (as a lifestyle), so that at the revelation of His glory (Christ's second coming or our own physical death), we may rejoice with extreme joy; we may leap for joy. We will see Jesus not in His humility, but as Lord of Lords and King of Kings. We will also see at last how we were privileged to share not only in His suffering, but also in His grand plan throughout the ages. Romans 8:16-19 says, "The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children--heirs also--heirs of God and fellow-heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him. For I consider the sufferings of this present time are not worthy of comparison with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God." So hang in there. Yes, the heat seems almost unbearable at times, but it won't kill you; it will purify you. Don't jump out of the crucible!

The second category of "fiery ordeal" which Peter mentions is that Christians will be "reviled for the name of Christ." Verse 14: "If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because of the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you." To be "reviled" covers everything from verbal abuse to physical abuse for the name of Christ. The Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) sent a letter with Paul and Barnabas to Antioch that said they were, "men who had risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ--the very 'name,'--who Jesus is and all that He stands for." Jesus Himself said to His disciples, "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you falsely on account of Me. Rejoice and be glad for your reward in heaven is great..." (Matthew 5:10-12).

In his new book, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, Robert Wilker writes about how the Roman governor Pliny (62?-113 A.D.), who ruled over Pontus and Bithynia, regarded Christians of the early second century. The governor had heard that Christians were involved in incest and human sacrifice, that they were haters of mankind, etc., so he had them investigated. But he could find no evidence of any crimes committed by the Christians. On the contrary, here is a quote from his findings about them, taken from letters of that time which have been excavated:

*They meet regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately among themselves in honor of Christ, as if to a god; and also to bind themselves by oath, not for any criminal purpose, but to abstain from theft, robbery and adultery; to commit no breach of trust, and not to deny a deposit when called upon to restore it...*

On hearing this, Pliny thought Christians were just part of another "superstition,"--a religious cult. He didn't know how to deal with them, so he wrote to the Emperor Trajan for instructions. But he didn't wait for a reply. He set up courts to try Christians and hear charges against them. The courts asked those accused of being Christians three times if they were in fact Christians. If the accused answered, "yes," they were punished by death. In his letter to the emperor, Pliny asked whether the mere name Christian was grounds for the death sentence, even if those professing to be Christians were innocent of any crimes; but he proceeded on the basis that Christians were guilty for the sake of the name alone. His decision was later confirmed by a letter from the emperor.

But Peter says Christians are "blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you." Regardless of

outward circumstances, the Holy Spirit and the Spirit of God the Father of all comfort is with you. He will give you comfort, power, peace and courage when necessary. That was Stephen's experience in the book of Acts when he was stoned because of his testimony. "Being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:55). Stephen was comforted in his suffering by the Trinity.

Finally, Peter says, "By no means let any of you suffer as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler" Apparently these were some of the characteristics of the people of Asia Minor. Peter brought up this idea earlier in this letter (2:20), when he addressed slaves in these words, "For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience?" Again, in 3:17, the apostle writes, "For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right, rather than for doing what is wrong." There were problems enough with the false charges being laid against them. This was how you acted in your old life in the flesh, Peter says, but now you are new creatures in Christ, with new power to live in the Spirit.

I am reminded of the first trip I made to Columbia for the prison ministry two years ago. I was speaking at a meeting of ex-convicts when a prisoner who had just been set free came into the meeting. He was so excited at his new-found freedom, and at being among his former fellow-prisoners, that I felt it made no sense to continue teaching, so I stopped and asked him to speak to us. He shared that he had just been released that very day. "In the past I killed four people," he said, "and I was sentenced to 25 years in jail. Then I came to know the Lord and for some reason, they reduced my sentence to six years, and today that sentence is up. You know that I can't read or write, so I want you to tell me all you know about Jesus Christ." He was not a murderer anymore, but a new creature in Christ, with a hunger to know about his Savior.

Peter continues, "But if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God." What is a Christian? A Christian is a person who once came to a time in his life where he realized he needed someone greater than himself and others around him to take away his sin, guilt and shame. By faith, he believed that that Someone was Jesus, God's only Son who was sent to this earth by His loving Father to die for his sins, and for all who place their faith in Him. He repented of his sin and confessed Jesus as Lord and Savior and was saved from the power of sin and death. He then was made a new man in Christ Jesus and was filled with the gift of the Holy Spirit, who provides all the power necessary to cope with his present reality until his physical death or until the second coming of Jesus in glory. But until that day, he knows that he has been "born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." His heart is filled with wholeness as he lives out his life on earth as a servant of Christ for good. But once he becomes a Christian, there will come times of fiery ordeals.

Don't be ashamed of your relationship with Jesus, Peter says. He probably was thinking of his own shame some 30 years earlier, when he denied his Master three times. But Peter never did anything like that again. For example, look at his actions before the Supreme Court of Israel after he healed a lame man. And note his reactions and those of the other disciples in Acts 5:40-42: "So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name. And every day in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ."

What is God doing to us in our present suffering? He is testing our faith--turning up the heat under the crucible so that He can scoop off impurities. Secondly,

### **He is judging His household**

**For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And if it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner? Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.**

Here Peter points out three realities from God's point of view. What is the household of God? In 2:5 of this letter,

the apostle says, "You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." Ephesians 2:19 says, "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow-citizens with the saints, and are of God's household." The household of God is made up of the children of God, those who call Jesus Christ their Lord and Savior, those who are born again and have new hearts; they are Christians--Christ-followers. As he viewed the church--the invisible, spiritual body of Christ in 64 A.D.--Peter realized that the church was only 30 years old, and yet, because of his knowledge of his own Jewish history under Jehovah, he was able to interpret the political, social and spiritual fiery ordeals that the second generation of Christians were suffering. As a Jew, he understood that God would judge His people, and that He would use His own enemies to do so. God had used the Egyptians, the Canaanites, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Greeks and now the Romans to judge Israel during the preceding 2000 years. Now He was using the Romans to judge His own very household to bring out the impurities of lust, malice, guile, hypocrisy, envy, slander, etc., so that in the end, they would be like the Holy One of God. That is what Peter said earlier: "Be holy yourself in all your behavior because it is written, 'you shall be holy because I am holy' since you have, in obedience to the truth, purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart." Christians have been born again. They have new life--new power to be like Jesus Christ on this earth.

The judgment of God was and is necessary because God is a Holy God and He cannot tolerate sin in His people. Sin must be judged by our Righteous Judge and Lord. Remember that Peter has been saying "the end of all things is at hand." We are salt and light in this world in our love and hospitality, and in our use of our spiritual gifts. All these things are being used by God to call out a people for His namesake. The heat of the crucible is absolutely necessary, for we are to "be holy, as He is holy."

The second reality in these verses is in these words: "And if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?" This judgment that Peter speaks of began with intensity on July 19, 64 A.D., when Nero launched the first of 10 persecutions against Christians. These continued over the next 250 years until the time of Constantine in 300 A.D. Peter himself was put to death not long after he wrote this letter because of these persecutions.

Then the apostle issues a warning to all who have heard the gospel message but refused to believe it. If the household of God, those who are seeking to worship and serve the Living God by the power of the Holy Spirit are being judged, what kind of a judgment will be unleashed on those who refuse the gospel? He quotes Proverbs 11:31 to drive home his point: "And if it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner?" 2 Thessalonians 1:3-10 says this about such people:

We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is only fitting, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love of each one of you toward one another is increasing; therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure. This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering. For after all, it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, for our testimony to you was believed.

The third reality which Peter brings before us is in verse 19: "Therefore, let those who also suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right." Jesus Himself is our example here. "He committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth. While being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously."

Suffering will come to all who seek to do the will of God. Trust Him. He knows what He is doing. Hang in there.

All is normal. God is turning up the heat to rid us of impurities so that we will mature; everything is on schedule. Writing from the island of Patmos to the church at Smyrna some 30 years later, the apostle John has left us with these encouraging words of Jesus:

**I know your tribulation and your poverty [but you are rich], and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation in ten days. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.**

What is God doing to us in our present suffering? He is testing our faith and He is judging His household. Rejoice, that at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exceeding joy.

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