

# THE SUFFERING OF THE SAINTS

*SERIES: LEARNING TO LIVE BY FAITH*

By Steve Zeisler

It's fun to observe babies learning to talk. Their first discernible word is a milestone, a thrilling moment for the parents and other family members. I think the first word I ever learned was "cookie," which may explain a number of things that have been true of me ever since. Further along when children say their first sentence, however, it may be less cute. The first sentence is often some version of this declaration: "It's not fair!" accompanied by the stamping of a small foot.

Cries against injustice (real or imagined) are as old as human history. They are heard in every place, in every time, in every language. They start in early childhood and continue through the rest of our lives. We transfer our outrage from parents to God. "It's not fair! You have failed!" And truly, the world is filled with injustice. The good die young, the innocent suffer, while those who are hardened and cruel move from one advantage to another. So at some point we place God in the dock as though we were prosecuting attorneys. We require him to account for himself, call on him to make sense of things that don't seem right to us.

Surveys have been taken asking why people who once believed lost their faith. The most common response is the problem of evil: "I can no longer believe in a God who allows such things to happen. He claims to have infinite power, yet he does not act."

In contrast, I don't know of any surveys taken of people who have the deepest faith. But my experience in talking to people who are mature in the Lord is that they have faced exactly the same problem and drawn a different conclusion. Those who know the Lord most profoundly have taken the question of injustice and suffering seriously, and at the point of the greatest sorrow they have found Christ on the cross.

If we are honest about our own pain, we rarely get the answer we seek from God. Instead he offers us his companionship in suffering. He speaks to us from the deepest place of suffering, and his offer is to bear it himself. Life comes by journeying through death, not by avoiding death.

The enduring emblem of the cause of Christ is the cross, the place of execution. It's not the Mount of Transfiguration or some other attractive image. Our common identity as Christians throughout history and throughout all the world is the Lord's Supper in which we remember his death. Paul says, "We preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." (1 Corinthians 1:23-24.)

We're approaching the end of our study of Hebrews 11. The pattern of the chapter has been to talk about individual saints who have gone before us and lived out their faith, and to make a comment about each. We heard about Abel, Noah, Sarah, and a number of others in this way. But starting in verse 32 the writer of Hebrews gives us a list of names that he doesn't comment

on, and then finally he makes a number of comments about people he doesn't name. The pace of remembering and writing quickens—"Time would fail me if I were to tell of everybody and say all the things that I'm thinking of!"

The first half of that list (verses 32-35a), which we considered in the last message (Discovery Paper 5248), is about events in which the people of God stepped into risky and difficult things and saw good outcomes. They trusted God, overcame their fears, and saw the world change as a result. They shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Flawed, ordinary people were made strong out of weakness.

In remembering these events we asked a question: Are we willing to be an instrument in the hand of God to make a difference in our world? Are we willing to step through a door that he opens for us that we may overturn some wickedness or create some beauty?

But starting in verse 35b the cascading phrases are about suffering, not victory. Verse 34 spoke of those who escaped the edge of the sword, but verse 37 tells of those who were put to death by the sword, who were not rescued, who did not see beautiful things happen in their own lifetime as a result of their choices.

Let's read verses 35b-38, in which suffering is viewed with seriousness and honesty:

**Others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection; and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.**

The list is not only sobering but unflinching. The hard questions about the nature of suffering, acknowledging that God's people are not exempt from it, are all in view. I want to make three observations about what we're told here. In each case the point of the observation will be to see that however awful something may be, Jesus suffered the most awful version of it. When we are willing to understand suffering and not run from it, we will find Christ there. We will find ourselves nearer to him, more aware of his heart, believing that he will lead us finally to resurrection on the other side of death.

## **Suffering with Christ**

The first observation is that some things are worth suffering for. Most of us have ordered our lives for the avoidance of difficulty, as if the greatest good is a pampered existence. Impatience has become an art form. Yet we are reminded in this text that there are things that are worth suffering for.

Verse 35b says, “Others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection....” There was opportunity for release. They could have given up their commitment to Christ, denied the faith, and been spared the hurt. Yet they chose to suffer.

My wife Leslie’s sister lives in France, and we had a chance to visit her in September. The plane was full going both directions, and we had coach seats. On the way over we were in the middle section of the longest set of seats, and the people in front of us reclined their seats for the entire flight. It was amazing how easy it was to complain about the wretchedness of our circumstances. “This is really miserable. People shouldn’t have to put up with this kind of thing. Why don’t the airlines widen these seats? And they never fly on time. And the food is crummy.” Now, in ten hours we went from San Francisco to Europe, where we were welcomed by a dear family member. In retrospect, the level of irritation about the hardship we felt on the plane was ridiculous.

And challenging such immaturity, our text reminds us of believers who were tortured and who died rather than turn from God. Of course, the supreme example of that choice is Jesus. In the garden of Gethsemane, he had the opportunity to say no to the cup that his Father placed before him. He told his disciples, “Do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels? How then will the Scriptures be fulfilled, which say that it must happen this way?” (Matthew 26:53-54.) When he was before Pilate, if he had answered Pilate’s question just slightly differently, he would have been released (Matthew 27:11; Mark 15:2; Luke 23:3-4; John 18:33-37). But he didn’t. There are some things worth suffering and dying for, and those include his love for people like us. He went willingly to the cross.

The second observation is that the worst kind of suffering is physical suffering accompanied by degradation. Verse 36: “Others experienced mockings and scourgings [again recall Jesus], yes, also chains and imprisonment.” The writer of Hebrews speaks of those who were sawn in two, decapitated, treated with contempt. It’s hard enough to suffer nobly, when you’re admired for heroic determination. But when you’re scorned and ridiculed, pain is magnified. And Jesus, of course, suffered exactly that way, as a criminal, taunted, spat upon—humiliated.

The text before us is about the hardest kind of suffering. It’s about the kind that doesn’t make any sense to us. And every time we take it to the farthest point, we find the Lord saying, “I’m here with you. There’s an end to this. There’s a journey ahead that I will take you on. Come with me.”

The third observation is that suffering is most acute when the victim is alone. Verse 38: “Wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.” Jesus ate the Passover meal with his disciples, creating among them the most intimate community, but then when the awful moment came, when he needed them most, they abandoned him.

So again we ask, “God, where are you in the worst case, when the suffering comes with ridicule, when the suffering is born alone? Why don’t you act?” And what we hear him say is, “I have acted. I have born the most difficult things of all. And if you will let me, I will draw you nearest to me in the times when life makes the least sense.” The essential Christian affirmation: “I have

been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.” (Galatians 2:20.)

Finally, observe in our text that the world was not worthy of the saints who loved Christ more than life. The world was not worthy of our Lord Jesus, whom it treated with contempt and violence. Jesus said that someday the last will be first (Matthew 20:16; Mark 10:31; Luke 13:30). The value system that dominates our world today will someday be turned on its head. All the greed-based valuations will be exposed as worthless, and what is really worthwhile will be shown: those who are approved by God and who honor God.

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