

## Christian Suffering in this Age

### **Introduction**

In numerous places, the New Testament states that followers of Christ should **expect** to face trials and persecution. Both Jesus and the apostles stated that fact. Here are some examples:

#### **John 15:18-20 (ESV):**

<sup>18</sup> “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. <sup>19</sup> If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. <sup>20</sup> Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.

#### **1 Peter 4:12 (ESV):**

<sup>12</sup> Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.

#### **2 Timothy 3:12-13 (ESV):**

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, <sup>13</sup> while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.

Of course, Christians definitely *have* faced many trials and persecutions over the years – and those trials continue to this day. For example, in some countries, it is illegal to even *own a Bible*.

The apostles, themselves, suffered *horrific* persecution during their lives. One might expect that such persecution would cause them to become disheartened; and perhaps even to fall away from their faith. So, let’s take a look at the reactions that the apostles had, when they were persecuted:

#### **Acts 5:40-41 (ESV):**

<sup>40</sup> And when they [the Sadducees] had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. <sup>41</sup> Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.

#### **Acts 16:22-25 (ESV):**

<sup>22</sup> The crowd joined in attacking them [Paul and Silas], and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. <sup>23</sup> And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. <sup>24</sup> Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

<sup>25</sup> About midnight [after being thrown in prison] Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God...

Notice the reaction of the apostles when they suffered persecution. In Acts 5, the apostles *rejoiced* that they had been persecuted. Similarly, in Acts 16, Paul and Silas were moved to *pray* and *sing hymns* to God, when they were persecuted.

In other words, not only did the apostles **not** *lose* their faith due to persecution, but their faith was apparently *strengthened* by it!

Not only that, but James tells us that all Christians (not just the apostles) should *rejoice* in the face of trials:

**James 1:2 (ESV):**

<sup>2</sup> Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds...

So, from all of the above information, two main questions arise:

First, why in the world should Christians *rejoice*, when they encounter trials and persecution?

Second, why does God permit Christians to be persecuted by unbelievers *at all*? In other words, what is the *purpose* behind Christian suffering, during this age?

Some possible answers to those questions are listed below.

**Rejoicing in the face of persecution**

First off, it appears that if a person undergoes persecution for the sake of *Christ*, then that identifies the person as a true *Christian*. Of course, that identification should be very heartening to sincere Christians.

To demonstrate this, take a look at Acts 5:40-41 again:

**Acts 5:40-41 (ESV):**

<sup>40</sup>And when they [the Sadducees] had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. <sup>41</sup>Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.

Basically, the apostles rejoiced that they were considered *worthy* to suffer for Christ. It appears to me that there are two basic reasons **why** they rejoiced. First, they had such great love for Jesus, that they considered it an honor to suffer for him.

In addition to that, though, the fact that the apostles had to *suffer* for Christ confirmed that they were true *followers* of Christ. They knew this because Jesus explicitly stated that his followers were going to face persecution for his sake. As a result, the persecution that the apostles encountered indicated that Christ considered them to be *sincere* followers – and that *greatly* encouraged them.

In addition, consider these passages:

**1 Peter 4:14 (ESV):**

<sup>14</sup> If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

### **Matthew 5:11-12 (ESV):**

<sup>11</sup> “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Both of the above passages also indicate that persecution for Christ is an “identifying mark” of a Christian – and that that identification should be heartening to Christians.

So, it appears that one reason why the apostles *rejoiced* when they endured persecution, is because that demonstrated to them that God **recognized** their devotion to Christ. I expect that *all* sincere Christians would be encouraged by such recognition.

Of course, that still leaves the question of *why* God allows Christians to suffer in the *first place*.

### **The purpose behind Christian suffering**

The apostles had quite a bit to say, about why Christians are made to suffer during this age. Here is just a small excerpt, from the writings of Peter, James and Paul:

#### **1 Peter 5:8-10 (ESV):**

<sup>8</sup> Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. <sup>9</sup> Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. <sup>10</sup> And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.

#### **James 1:2-4 (ESV):**

<sup>2</sup> Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, <sup>3</sup>for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. <sup>4</sup>And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

#### **Romans 5:3-5 (ESV):**

<sup>3</sup>More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, <sup>4</sup>and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, <sup>5</sup>and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

All of the above passages tell us that suffering is able to produce “good fruit” in sincere Christians. That fact is actually borne out historically: The early Christians – who were persecuted mercilessly – demonstrated *enormous* faith.

In other words, the above passages appear to state that *suffering* can allow Christians to develop qualities that will be *useful in the kingdom!* To put it another way, trials and persecution can “train us for the kingdom”, so to speak.

Many passages in Scripture (including the one in 1 Peter, above) indicate that Christian suffering is brought about by *enemies* of God – i.e., either by the adversary, or by people who are opposed to God.

In *addition* to that, though, some passages in Scripture indicate that God, *Himself*, disciplines believers – *and* that that discipline can be “painful”. In other words, in some cases, it appears that **God** (or His agent) is actually causing temporary suffering for Christians – for our own good! Consider this passage:

**Hebrews 12:5-6,11 (ESV):**

<sup>5</sup>And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?

“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,  
nor be weary when reproved by him.

<sup>6</sup>For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,  
and chastises every son whom he receives.”

<sup>11</sup> For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

To demonstrate this, consider what happened when Paul (Saul) was addressed by Jesus, in Acts 9:1-19. Saul had been vigorously **persecuting** Christians – because at that time, he was *thoroughly* convinced that Christians were *enemies* of God. Jesus then caused Saul to be struck blind – temporarily – evidently in order to help Saul realize that God *wants* people to follow Christ.

So, in at least *some* cases, Christians may be made to suffer temporary difficulties by God (or Jesus). In those cases, though, the suffering is *explicitly* designed for our own good.

## Conclusion

Luke chapter 19, verses 11 through 27, contains the parable of the “minas”. That parable contains the following basic points:

- A nobleman is about to set off on a long, “round trip” journey. Basically, this nobleman is heading off to a distant land, in order to receive authority to rule as king over his own country – and after that, he is going to *return* to his country, to begin his reign.
- Before the nobleman leaves, he distributes some money among his servants. This money is in units of currency called “minas”. The nobleman then instructs his servants to *use* those minas, to engage in commerce, while he is away.
- When the nobleman returns, he finds that two of his servants have used their minas very profitably – the first servant gained 10 *additional* minas, and the second servant gained 5 *additional* minas. The nobleman is pleased with their work; and gives the first servant authority over 10 entire cities, and the second servant authority over 5 cities.
- However, the third servant did not use his mina *at all* – instead, he kept it hidden away in a handkerchief. The nobleman chastises this servant for not making use of the mina – and then he gives that mina to the servant who has 10 of them!

A very similar parable exists in Matthew 25:14-30. One difference between the two parables is that in Matthew, the coins given to the servants are *not* minas; instead, they are **talents**.

Both of those parables use the following symbolism:

- The *nobleman* represents Jesus;
- The *country* that the nobleman will rule represents the kingdom of God;
- The *servants* of the nobleman represent Christians;
- The *minas / talents* represent the different abilities that God has given to individual Christians.

It certainly appears to me that both of those parables indicate that God wants us to **use** the abilities (or *talents*) that he has given us – both to serve Him, and to improve upon those abilities. In other words, it appears that God wants us “build upon” the talents that we were given.

As mentioned above, it appears that one reason why Christians are made to suffer is because that helps to “train” us for the kingdom. The parables of the minas / talents seem to reinforce this idea of “training” – and those parables *also* indicate that if we **do** use our abilities as God wants us to, then we may be granted positions of *authority* in the kingdom!