

On Suffering

By Michael Clark

Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing is happening to you, but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy." (1 Peter 4:12, NJKV)

To write on this subject is sheer folly. First, it is not a message that comfort-driven Americans with all the money want to hear. Second, every time we dare to write on an unpopular subject that involves denying ourselves, Father requires us to walk it out shortly thereafter. But we can obey or we can choose the easy way out. The gospel of the kingdom of God is not the modern gospel of convenience that fills mega-churches with joyful followers. Are we willing to lay all at Jesus' feet and take up our crosses and follow Him, or are we going to be followers after another gospel, another Jesus, led by another spirit?

My wife, Dorothy, and I recently bought a DVD of the movie, "Shadowlands." It is a story played out by Anthony Hopkins and Debra Winger about a period in the latter days of the life of the famous Christian author, C. S. Lewis. Funny how Hollywood can catch the essence of life from time to time, even more than the most gifted preacher ever hoped to.

"Isn't God supposed to be good? Isn't He supposed to love us? Does God want us to suffer? What if the answer to that question is, 'Yes'?" I suggest to you that it is because God loves us that He makes us the gift of suffering.

"I'm not sure that God wants us to be happy. I think He wants us to be able to love and be loved. He wants us to grow-up. We think our childish toys bring us all the happiness there is and our nursery is the whole wide world. But something must drive us out of the nursery to the world of others and that something is suffering.

"You see, we are like blocks of stone out of which the sculptor carves forms of men. The blows of His chisel, which hurt so much, are what makes us perfect."

With these words, spoken at a lecture by Lewis (known by his friends as Jack), the stage is set for a divine collision. Lewis, the great Christian wit and man of insight, has it all quite figured out. But into his well ordered life of Christian philosophy and

academia as an Oxford professor, by whom you could set your watch, comes an American atheist divorcee named Joy Gresham. She becomes his undoing. She sees things as they really are in a way that none of his admirers nor any of those in their ivory towers could see, for hers has been a life filled with pain and suffering.

At one point, Lewis was laying out to her his theory of why there is suffering in this world that is governed by a loving God. To this she asks if he had ever really been hurt. He tells her how he was hurt when his mother died when he was nine years old adding, "The first time is always the worst." At this point, my wife Dorothy responded, "That's not true. The pain keeps growing."

Here we see the crux of the matter. This is where most of us are. We get hurt early on in our lives and we build a lifestyle about us that will never let it happen again. If we are successful, "The first time is the worst," because the first time is the only time. We set out take control of our lives and even the lives of those around us as we build our fortress of protection, refusing to be hurt again. We scheme, we posture, we coerce, we climb. Never mind that we wound and control dozens of people around us as we dig in and build our perimeter. I know; I am a Vietnam war veteran. I have been what is known as "trip-wire vet." My wife knows the pain of living with someone who has tried to be "safe" at all costs, swearing never to let people hurt him like that again. It is a life surrounded by trip-wires, booby traps and concertina wire fences. Woe to the person that dares to enter your space.

At one point Lewis takes Joy up to his little ivory tower classroom to show her around. Here a the dialogue occurs that is most revealing:

Joy: "So what do you do here, think great thoughts?"

Lewis: "Teach mostly."

Joy: "What do they do, sit at your feet and gaze up at you in awe?"

Lewis: "No, not at all."

Joy: "I bet they do."

Lewis: "We have some fine old battles in here, I can tell you that."

Joy: "Which you win! Must be quite a boost for you, being older and wiser than all of them, not to mention your readers."

Lewis: "What?"

Joy: "Your readers, not to mention that gang of friends of yours, all very well trained

not to live out of bounds."

Lewis: "What are you talking about?"

Joy: "And of course there is Warnie (Lewis' live-in brother). Not much competition there."

Lewis: "That is nonsense. What about Christopher Riley [an atheist professor at the college]? He never let's me get away with anything. You know that."

Joy: "Except doubt and fear and pain and terror!"

Lewis: "Where did all that come from?"

Joy: "Look, I have only now just seen it. How you've arranged a life for yourself where no one can touch you. Everyone that is close to you is either younger than you or weaker than you or under your control."

Lewis: "Why are you getting at me? I thought we were friends?"

Joy: "I don't know that we are friends. Not the way you have friends, anyway. Sorry, Jack (She grabs her coat and heads for the door).

Lewis: "I don't understand!"

Joy: "No, I think you do. You just don't like it, nor do I."

Have you ever wondered why the Bible says that Jesus learned obedience by the things that He suffered? I mean, He is the Son of God, right? Perfect in every way. Why should the all-knowing Son of God have to learn anything? I think it is because the Author of our salvation had to be tempted in every way, just like us, and yet overcome.

Vulnerability goes hand in hand with unselfish love. You can not truly love without laying yourself open to suffering. Anyone who has raised a child knows that this is true. First you say to yourself, "I sure will be glad when he is potty trained." Then when you have passed that hurdle it is, "I sure will be glad when this two- year-old turns three." Then, "Man, I sure will be happy when he can entertain himself." "I sure will be glad when I can send him off to school." "I sure look forward to the day when he graduates and can get out there on his own and I can quit worrying and suffering." That is the biggest delusion of them all. The suffering and pain of having a child never ends. As they get older, the tendency for trouble ever increases, and their life struggles, failures, divorces, bankruptcies, etc. all become yours, one way or another.

So how do we deal with this pain? Well, some of us parents run out quickly to extinguish the fires. We bail them out and try to protect them from the consequences of

their own foolishness. They sow the wind and we reap their whirlwind. We become living "saints," always doing the right thing by them--or are we?

Then there is the other tactic. When we were in Vietnam, men were dying all around us. At first you cared and mourned their loss, but after a while the pain was too much so you got callused and indifferent. After the third or fourth time you told yourself, "It don't mean nothing." Some of us have learned to deal with pain by becoming hardened to it. We have walled off our hearts so that no one else's pain can reach us. This has been my poison of choice in the past. If you don't bother to really love, you can't get hurt.

Over the last few years of suffering much at the hands of my fellow saints in an effort to "have fellowship," I have become much like our brother C. S. Lewis. I dug in and studied those scriptures that had been hurled at me and used to justify their Christian indifference (now there is an oxymoron), to find out the antidote. How can I become immune to this kind of abuse and still be a "Christian"?

In another dialogue between Lewis and Joy Gresham we hear:

Lewis: "Personal experience isn't everything."

Joy: "I disagree. I think personal experience is everything."

Lewis: "So reading is a waste of time?"

Joy: "No, its not a waste of time, but reading is safe, isn't it? Books aren't about to hurt you."

Lewis: "Why should one want to be hurt?"

Joy: "That's when we learn."

Lewis: "Just because something hurts does not make it more true or more significant."

Joy: (seeing that his protective stance would not let him hear): "No, I guess not."

Lewis: "I am not saying that pain is purposeless or even neutral, but to find meaning in pain... There has to be something else. Pain is a tool. If you like..."

Joy: "Pain is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

Lewis: "You have read my book. You know me too well."

Survival at all cost. That is the nature of man, be he heathen or saint. We glibly say as we are called to give our Wednesday evening pop-up testimony, "I just want to follow Jesus." Have we ever really looked at where He went? When he was about to go to the cross, he told his overconfident disciples, "Where I go you can not follow." They were

not only unable, but down inside no matter how sure they were, they, like many of us, flat-out unwilling to take up their cross and follow Him. A deeper work was still needed to walk as selflessly as the Master.

The cross is not some pretty gold symbol on a gold chain that adorns the lovely neck of some movie star or model. It is an instrument of suffering, self denial and death. It is also an instrument of unselfish love. Those who follow Jesus must deny that inward drive to preserve themselves and dare to love as God loves--at all costs. If you dare to take this path, you will find out early-on that many of the ones you love will do anything they can to keep from going the distance with you, including denying you, betraying you and totally forsaking you. You have the smell of death about you. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life. And who is sufficient for these things?" ([2 Corinthians 2:14-16, NKJV](#)). Interesting how these two verses align; among those who are being saved--the aroma of death, but among those who are perishing--the aroma of life.

Are we sufficient for these things? Are we ready, like Jesus and Paul, not to let anyone dissuade us from going up to Jerusalem to die when our personal cross calls us onward? Are we willing to preach a gospel that will not only cost us our lives, but all our popularity with family and even with our fellow saints? If you think that the life of Jesus was a fluke, have you ever read about the lives of those who have gone before us, who walked by faith? Read Hebrews chapter eleven. THESE were the true faith teachers, and they paid for their faith with lives of suffering and rejection. No prosperity doctrine here. They risked all their creature comforts to follow the leading of the Father. These were persecuted, sawn in two, and lived in caves. This is the narrow way. These are true sons of God.

A few nights ago I got a phone call from our youngest son, Joseph. He was all broken up about the death of a long time friend who had just died without accepting Christ. Joe was blaming himself for this loss and for not preaching to his friend while he was still alive.

The following is an excerpt of a letter I wrote him after I hung up:

Dear Joe,

Thank you for your phone call tonight. It was such a privilege to have you call and share your dear heart with me, the one who did so much to crush it as I tried with a callused exterior to keep away any more pain.

If there is one word that seems to describe life it is "suffering." But why? Is suffering the end or the means? If it is the end, then life is full of futility and then we die, but if suffering is the means, then there must be hope.

I, like so many in my family tree, have spent my life trying to fend off suffering by never allowing myself to be close enough to love or to know love. Suffering is made most acute when we are either attacked by or left by someone we love, and one form of leaving is death. It is the worst, for it is so final as far as this world is concerned. So we deal with suffering by never letting ourselves to be touched by love or loving others in return. When my father died, I never cried. Too much pain and disappointment was coming to an end. I had walled my heart off from letting him hurt me again.

Joe, I can see that I have often done this with you and the family. Learn from it. Be honest and vulnerable. Do not hide behind a joking exterior and subtle put-downs. Do not study the scriptures in order to have ammunition to keep those who might wound you away like I have, but rather love. Love until it hurts. Open your heart and let Jesus flow through to those around you. I hope you do not mind me preaching to myself here. I have kept you all, even your mom, so distant over the years.

Let the pain of the past and the present be turned into happiness as you reach out in love to those around you, especially your dear family.

I will love you always and seek to find ways of showing it more each day,

Your Dad

The movie ends with Joy's son Douglas and Lewis hugging and weeping together, getting in touch with the pain of losing such a wonderfully honest person whom they both loved so much. Finally, they are shown taking a walk together like a father should with his son, in touch, vulnerable... in love.

In final dialogue of the "Shadowlands," Lewis is saying, "I suppose some people would say we love to know we are not alone. But why love if losing it hurts so much? I have no answers anymore, only the life I have lived. Twice in that life I have been given the choice: as a boy... and as a man. The boy chose safety. The man chooses suffering. The pain now is part of the happiness then. That's the deal."