

# The School of Suffering

by Joseph Tson

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*Joseph Tson's sermon emphasizes that suffering is an integral part of the Christian journey, leading to personal growth, the salvation of others, and ultimately glorifying God.*

**Topics:** "Suffering And Persecution", "Following Christ"

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## Description

Joseph Tson preaches about the three-fold attack on Christians in Romania by the Communist regime, targeting individuals, churches, and pastors. He emphasizes the need for believers to understand the purpose of suffering, not expecting a life free from troubles but rather embracing suffering as a call to follow in Christ's steps. Tson shares insights on suffering for personal perfection, for the benefit of others' salvation, and ultimately for the glory of God, drawing parallels from biblical examples like Job and modern-day martyrs.

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## Transcript

The communist attack in Romania is a three-fold one directed toward individuals, churches, and pastors. The primary plan of attack on individual Christians is to make their life miserable where they work. Discriminate! Demote! Keep them at the lowest place. Continually tell them how they are not wanted there, that they are merely tolerated. Make trouble for them! Harass them! There are few in prison. The main threat is this constant daily trouble, harassment, and hate.

Now I was a pastor to such people. I knew how much they had to suffer because they were always coming to me, their pastor. It was mainly this question of "Why?" "Why, pastor, why do we have to suffer like this? Why does God allow it? I had to study this issue of suffering. I had to give them an explanation, a reason for it.

Personally, I have a problem with certain preachers who say, "Come to Jesus and all your problems will be solved." I do not find that message in the New Testament. I find a Christ who says, "Before following Me, stop and ponder. You have to enter a narrow gate, to walk a narrow path with very few on it. You will be hated because of Me. I am poor, poorer than a fox. You must know whom you follow. And you must know that it involves taking a cross daily. A cross means dying. Make your mind up and only then follow."

The great book on suffering is I Peter. In chapter two, Peter is speaking of suffering for doing good. Then he adds in verse 21, "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps." "To THIS you were called." To what? We were called to suffering. You

see, suffering is a call. It is not an accident.

I had the extremely rare privilege, for my generation of Romanians, of going to study theology at Oxford University in 1969. I was aware, during the three years that I spent abroad, that when I returned to Romania, I would be facing difficult situations. I was preparing myself for the worst. One way I prepared myself was by going repeatedly to the Martyrs' Monument in the center of Oxford. Three giants of the faith, Latimer, Ridley and Cranmer, were burned at the stake there in Oxford during the Reformation period. Over and over I meditated on the words engraved there: "...rejoicing that to them it was given not only to believe in Christ, but also to suffer for His sake..." These three men went to the stake rejoicing that they were given the honor to suffer for Jesus.

Now what is involved in suffering? What does suffering mean? As we go further in Scripture, we find three deep meanings. When I try to arrange them in logical sequence, I see that they are actually three steps toward Christian maturity. As we examine them, please try to locate yourself--just where are you in these stages.

First of all, suffering is for our perfection. Peter speaks of this aspect of suffering. I especially appreciate his words in I Peter 2:5. He is speaking about suffering and in that context mentions that we are living stones, to be built one day into a spiritual temple. What does he mean by that? He has in mind Solomon's temple.

Now Solomon had a fantastic team of architects who calculated every stone needed in that building and planned for each one individually. He had 80,000 stonecutters up in the mountains in the quarry, cutting and polishing every stone as it was planned. They were all brought to the building site and one day the signal was given "Build!" And the temple was assembled.

We are specifically told that there was no noise of chisel or hammer. Why does the Old Testament emphasize that? Because only then can we understand what Peter says. We, God's saints from all ages, are living stones, which one day are going to be built into a spiritual temple. What a beauty that building will be--with God inside! And as we are assembled together, there will be no noise of chisel or hammer. Why? Because the chipping off will have been done on this planet. Here God has His stonecutters, His hammers and His chisels working on us for that day when we will be perfected.

At one time in Romania, the secret police were orchestrating a vicious campaign against me. Anonymous letters were sent to my church members--so ugly that I could hardly stand it. The church people were worried and

disturbed. It was then that I understood this concept of the quarry. I gave a sermon explaining, "Listen, I don't have enemies. All these people are my God's stonecutters to me. And you know what a stubborn stone I am--very difficult to work on. I still have rough corners that I hurt people with and they are working hard to chip them off. They teach me to be gracious. They teach me to be humble. They teach me to be longsuffering, patient and forgiving. How could I learn all these things without these troublemakers? They are not enemies--they are my Father's stonecutters for me."

I spoke on this in a church here in America. The following day, a medical doctor called and asked me to meet him for lunch. There, over our meal, he told me that he had a million dollars--his whole fortune--invested in a building project which had gone bankrupt. He had lost everything. And he was now awaiting a court decision, expecting to have even his house sold to pay the final debt. He took me in his

car and drove down by those half-finished houses. As he was driving, with a deep voice he said slowly. "Pastor, this is my quarry. This is where God is working on me."

What is your quarry? Each one of us has his own stonecutter. What is yours? This is the first meaning of suffering--for our perfection. God is working for us--ON us--preparing us for glory.

Then there is a second meaning in suffering--suffering for others. In II Corinthians 1:6, Paul says that if he suffers, it is "for your comfort and salvation." What does he mean? Of course, we cannot suffer for the salvation of others as Jesus suffered to atone for our sins. Yet we can suffer for the salvation of someone else. Let me illustrate.

In Romania, if you hold a high position, when you become a Christian you will be demoted. In my church, a man, who was top manager of a huge factory, got converted. About a month later, he came to me and said, "Brother Joseph, they found out that I became a Christian. Now they are going to bring together thousands of people, the whole factory. They will mock me, deride me and then, of course, demote me. I'll be happy if they even keep me on the smallest salary possible. But they will give me a few minutes to defend myself. How shall I do it?"

"Oh," I answered, "don't defend yourself. This is your great chance. Tell them who Jesus is, what He did in you and what He is for you today." Instantly his face shone and he said, "Oh, I know what I'm going to do!" And he did it. So effectively that, afterwards, he kept coming to me saying, "You know, I hardly can move in the factory today. Wherever I go, somebody grabs my hand, pulls me into the corner, checks to make sure that nobody sees him talking with me and then he says, 'Give me the address of your church.' Or, 'Tell me more about Jesus.' Or, 'Give me a Bible.'" People were saved because of the way that man suffered for the Lord.

Now you may never undergo that sort of treatment. But you can still suffer for someone else's salvation. A lady in my church came to me one day and shared, "You know, I've been in the hospital recently. I've never been a hospital before and as they put me in the bed, I felt miserable. But I remembered the teaching in Scripture. I shook off my own misery. I saw there were three other ladies in that room. I took my Bible. Pastor, two of them accepted the Lord as their Savior. The third one promised me that she will come to church. Now I know why I had to get that sick--for the salvation of those women."

Paul also says, "I suffer for your comfort." "Comfort" is a Latin word which actually means "empowering." I suffer to make you stronger. Paul explains this in Philippians 1:12-14, where he says in effect, "Don't worry about my imprisonment. You know it only helps to further the gospel. People here in Rome all know that I suffer for Christ and, because I am in prison, they have more courage to witness for the Lord."

I had the same experience two years after I returned to Romania from England. Because of one of my writings, I was placed under house arrest for six months, during which time I was called in for interrogation almost daily. I was charged with propaganda endangering the security of the state. During that time, I still had to preach every Friday night and on Sundays. People listened just to see what sort of subject I would tackle. One Sunday, I preached on joy with Nehemiah 8:10 as my text, "The joy of the Lord is your strength." Somebody told me, "Joseph, for me the message is just to know that for a whole week you were there at interrogation. I thought I was going to see a wreck on Sunday. But here you were with a shining face thundering about joy. That's the sermon for me." People were inspired, they were strengthened, and they got a new vision. So it is when we suffer for someone else's encouragement and salvation.

Now, as you can see, the first step is great--for our perfection. But it is rather selfish. As we step upward, we see that suffering can be for others. There is yet a higher place, even higher than that. That is where suffering is only for the glory of God.

The Old Testament records how God boasted one day that He had a tremendously faithful man on earth. Satan said, "Oh no, he worships you out of interest. You give him so much. Just take away all that he has and he will curse you. That will prove how you only buy people's worship." God's honor was challenged. God accepted the challenge. Job knew nothing of this but one day the messengers started coming. One told him that all his grandchildren had perished in a storm. Another, that all his fortune was gone. He was poor. Nothing left. Then another day he saw that he was full of boils. There, with the dogs coming to lick his wounds, his wife came and said, "Can't you see, just curse God and finish with it."

Three other friends came and said the same. "Why don't you give in? God is against you. God is punishing you." But Job said, "Wait a minute. Let's clarify this issue with God. I don't know what He has against me. But I can tell you one thing. Even if He kills me, I will still praise Him." At that moment, all heaven began to applaud. Because all heaven was watching. All heaven knew that God's honor was uplifted, vindicated and defended.

God has His "Jobs" in every generation. I had the privilege to know such a modern "Job." He spent over 16 years in prison for his Christian poetry. Last summer he was arrested again and sentenced to two years. This man is 70 years old. He wrote a poem there in prison which says:

God, help me to love you even if you never answer one of my prayers.

Help me to trust you even if my enemies continue to beat me all my life.

And help me to be faithful to you even if I know there will be no reward for me in Eternity.

Suffering just for the glory of God--that is sublime. You cannot go beyond that. That is beauty! That is the ultimate!

For many years, Brother Joseph was a pastor, teacher, and evangelist in his native Romania. In 1972, he began to stand against governmental intrusion into the affairs of the church, insisting that Jesus alone was Lord over His Church. Brother Joseph was immediately accused of "endangering the security of the state" and spent the next ten years being harassed, interrogated, and even imprisoned by the Communist authorities. Finally, in 1981 Brother Joseph and his wife and daughter were permanently exiled from their homeland.

Born out of those years of suffering, a sweet resemblance to the likeness of Jesus radiates from the faces of these servants of God. Our hearts were captivated as they tenderly spoke of the spiritual riches and joy that have become theirs through suffering. This article, condensed from a message by Brother Joseph, reflects far more than a theoretical understanding of God's purpose in suffering. This is a message formed in a life under pressure of fire and testing. Our prayer is that it will enable you to view suffering from God's perspective.

May these words also serve to remind us to pray for our brothers and sisters around the world who are experiencing the fellowship of His sufferings. "Let brotherly love continue. Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them...(Hebrews 13:1, 3).

Today Brother Joseph is devoting his time to overseeing the translation, printing, and distributing of theological books for Christians in Romania. For further information about this ministry, write to Joseph Tson, Romanian Missionary Society, 141 N. Washington Street, Suite 4, Wheaton, IL 60187.

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