

# The Ministry of Suffering

by J.R. Miller

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*The ministry of suffering is a messenger from God to make us more holy and pure, to promote purification of character, and to prepare us for eternal inheritance.*

**Scripture:** Romans 5:3, Revelation 7:14

**Topics:** "Suffering", "Spiritual Growth"

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## Description

J.R. Miller emphasizes the transformative power of suffering in his sermon 'The Ministry of Suffering,' illustrating that those who endure tribulation on earth are often the ones who shine brightest in heaven. He explains that suffering is not a punishment but a divine messenger that purifies and prepares believers for their eternal inheritance. Miller draws parallels between earthly suffering and the beauty that emerges from it, likening it to the growth of lilies from dark soil. He encourages Christians to embrace their trials as opportunities for spiritual growth and to seek true comfort in Christ, assuring them that their tribulations will ultimately lead to glory. The sermon concludes with the hope that beyond earthly pain lies eternal joy in heaven.

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## Transcript

One of the most remarkable visions of the book of Revelation, shows us a throng arrayed in white robes--heaven's most honored ones. When the question is asked, "Who are these, and where did they come from?" the answer is, "These are those who came out of great tribulation." That is, the glorified ones of heaven, have been the suffering ones of earth. Suffering is a cloud whose earth-side is very black, unrelieved oftentimes by a single gleam of brightness. But here we get a glimpse of the heaven-side of the same cloud. Those who have been in sore tribulation in this world for Christ--appear in brightest glory in heaven. The sufferings through which they have passed have not destroyed them, have not marred nor defaced the beauty of their lives. Indeed, they are seen here away beyond the experiences of pain and trial, shining in robes of victory and blessedness. And this high honor is the result of the godly suffering of their earthly life.

Some people regard suffering as punishment for sin, and when it comes to them--they ask what they have done to merit such severe treatment. Others interpret it as showing unkindness in God, and ask, if God is their Father and loves them--why He does send such trials upon them?

But the Scriptures, while they do not solve all the mystery of suffering, show us that it is no accident in God's world--but is one of God's messengers, which, if received in humility and faith, will always leave a

blessing.

Our Lord once bade His disciples consider the lilies, how they grew. Where do the lilies get their beauty? Down in the darkness of the soil the roots lie, hidden, despised, amid clods; but there they prepare the loveliness and the sweetness which make the lilies so admired as they press up into the air. Is it not so with the fairest things of life, with the sweetest things of experience? Are not many of them born down in the darkness of sorrow, suffering, or pain? Many a life which we admire, whose gentleness, purity, and sweetness are blessings to the world, got these lovely things in a sick-room or in experiences of suffering.

This is the great truth that lies in this picture in the book of Revelation. The glorified saints, with their white robes and their palms, had come out of great tribulation; and the tribulation had helped to give them their radiant garments and their glad joy. We may say, then, that the design of God, in all the afflictions which come upon His people, is to make them more holy, to promote their purification of character, to prepare them for their eternal inheritance!

The word "tribulation" is suggestive. It comes from a word which means a flail. The thresher uses the flail to beat and bruise the wheat sheaves, that he may separate the golden grain from the chaff and straw. Tribulation is God's threshing, not to destroy us--but to get what is good, heavenly, and spiritual in us--separated from what is sinful, earthly, and fleshly. Nothing less than blows of pain will do this. The evil so clings to the good; the golden wheat of goodness in us is so wrapped up in the strong chaff of the old life, that only the heavy flail of suffering, can produce the separation.

Not all sufferings hang death-crape on doors. The family circle may not be broken by bereavement, and yet there may be tribulation crashing deep into the heart. There are people who wear no garb or sign of mourning, who yet are really mourners. There are those who carry pain at their hearts continually, in the brightest sunshine, when they seem grieved and happiest, because of things in those nearest and dearest to them, which weigh upon them like a cruel cross.

Then, not all the sufferings that visit the soul, come from without; indeed, the worst grief is that which the evil of our own hearts has caused. To a tender spirit, nothing gives so much pain--as its own sins and failures. We grieve when we have to lay a friend away in the grave; but we ought to grieve far more when some sin has defiled our conscience and hung a new veil between our soul and God. In the earnest Christian life, there are no tears so bitter--as those which are shed in the soul's agonies as it strives after holiness!

There is no truth taught more clearly, than that perfection of character can be reached only through suffering. We can never get away from our old self, and grow up into purity, strength, and nobleness--without pain. The fires of evil passion and iniquity which are in our old nature, cannot be burned out without agony. Holiness cannot be reached without cost. Those who would gain the lofty heights--must climb the cold, rough steeps which lead to them. It is God's design in all the pain He sends us--to make us better. His fires mean purification. His prunings mean more fruitfulness. In whatever form the suffering comes--as bereavement, as sin or shame in a friend, or as penitence and contrition over one's own faults--the purpose of pain is merciful. God is saving us in all our life in this world--and suffering is one of the chief agents He employs. The redeemed in heaven have come out of great tribulation. But for the tribulation, they would never have worn the white robes nor borne the palms.

Jesus gave us as one of His beatitudes, "Blessed are those who mourn; for they shall be comforted." It is worth while to notice where this beatitude stands. "Blessed are the poor in spirit." "Blessed are the meek."

"Blessed are the peacemakers." "Blessed are the merciful." "Blessed are the pure in heart." Then, in the heart of this cluster, "Blessed are they that mourn."

We do not question the blessedness of humility, of meekness, of the peacemaking spirit, of purity of heart, of mercifulness; and mourning is set by the Master in the same cluster. Heaven's radiant light shines about Christian sorrow, just as about purity of heart, mercifulness, or spiritual hunger. Yet the blessing lies not in the sorrow--but in the comfort. "Blessed are those who mourn--for they shall be comforted." God's comfort is such a rich blessing, that it is worth while to have sorrow that we may have the comfort. This picture in the Apocalypse, from the heavenly side, helps us to understand our Lord's beatitude. Those who have mourned on earth--will wear the whitest robes in the glory of heaven.

Paul, too, speaks of the blessed ministry of suffering. "We glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation works patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope." That is, tribulation works out in us qualities of Christian character, which cannot be developed in human gladness. In the Epistle to the Hebrews, the doctrine of suffering is put in this way: "All chastening seems for the present to be not joyous--but grievous: yet afterward it yields peaceable fruit unto them that have been exercised thereby, even the fruit of righteousness."

Pain is God's pruning-knife; it cuts deeply, oftentimes, and seems to destroy--but the result is greater fruitfulness. Suffering is God's furnace-fire. Its hot flames burn as if to work utter destruction; but afterwards the gold that before was dim and impure--shines in dazzling brightness!

We have all known Christian sufferers who have grown into rare, sweet beauty as they have suffered. They have lost their earthliness, and have learned heavenliness. Pride--has given way to humility. Impatience--has become sweet patience. The harsh music--has grown soft and gentle. The rough marble--has taken the shape of graceful beauty. It is true, as a rule, that the noblest, richest, purest, most beautiful lives in this world--have been lives of suffering. There are elements of loveliness in the depths of every life--which only the fires of pain can bring out. The photographer carries his picture into a darkened room to develop it. God often takes His children into the chamber of pain and draws the curtains, while He there brings out the features of His own image, which before had been only dim and shadowy outlines.

But our lesson is not yet complete. Not all afflictions, make people better. Not all who suffer, are made thereby more fit for heaven. Tribulation does not always work patience. Chastening does not always, even afterward, yield the peaceable fruit of righteousness. We have all seen people suffering--who only became more impatient, irritable, ill-tempered, selfish, and cold, as they suffered. Many a life loses all the beauty it ever had--in the furnace of affliction. There are dangerous shoals skirting the deeps of affliction, and many frail barks are wrecked in the darkness. In no experience of life have most people more need of wise friendship and firm, loving guidance--than in their times of trouble.

It is not said in the Revelation, that tribulation itself made the robes of the saints white. Tribulation is the instrument, the hand that washes; but it is the blood of the Redeemer that makes the garments shine so radiantly. That is, those who suffered were united to Christ as branches in a vine, and in all their sufferings were nourished by His life.

We should learn well how to meet and endure trial--so as to get from it the ministry of good and of blessing which God means it to work in us. We must make sure, for one thing, that we are truly in Christ. Two trees stood side by side one early spring. Both of them were bare. The sun poured down his warm beams upon them both, and the clouds emptied their rain upon them. Soon one of them was covered with bursting

buds and then with rich foliage; but the other was still bare as ever. One of the trees had life--and the other had no life. Where there was life--the sun and the rain called out rich beauty; where there was no life, the effect of the sun and rain was to make the tree even more dreary and desolate than before.

Just so, where there is spiritual life in a soul, afflictions call it out until it glows in every feature; where there is no Christ in the heart, afflictions only make the life wither.

Then to get the intended benefit of the ministry of pain, we must receive it as God's messenger. Once in the days of old, three strangers came to a good man's tent as wayfaring men. He courteously opened his doors to them and hospitably entertained them. It turned out that two of the men were angels, and the third was the Lord Himself! They brought their entertainer messages from God, and then departed, leaving blessings in his home. We imagine that all angels wear radiant dress and come with smiling face and gentle voice. Thus artists paint them. But truly they come oftentimes in very somber garb.

We should receive sorrow always reverently, with welcome, as God's messenger. We should accept its message, even in our pain, as a word from God Himself. No messenger of pain ever comes without a blessing in its hot hand for us. If we welcome it as coming in the name of the Lord, it will leave blessings. Mrs. Gilchrist says of Mary Lamb, "She had a life-long sorrow, and learned to find its companionship not bitter." It is possible so to acquiesce in God's will when it brings pain or grief, that all our life shall be enriched and blessed through the suffering.

To get the benefit of the ministry of suffering, we must seek true comfort. Most people have very imperfect ideas, regarding this matter of comfort. They suppose that if they can cease to weep, and resume again their old familiar course of life, they are comforted. They think only of getting through the trial, and not of getting anything of good or blessing out of it. But the real problem in enduring pain--is not to bear it bravely, without wincing; to pass through it patiently and even rejoicingly; but to get from it new strength for life, new purity of soul, new revealings of God's face, more of the love of Christ in our heart, and fresh grace for obedience and duty. We ought to get something good out of every experience of pain--some new victory over sin, some fresh impulse for service.

When we have passed through a season of suffering and stand beyond it--there ought to be a new light in our eye, a new glow in our face, a new gentleness in our touch, a new sweetness in our voice, a new hope in our heart, and a new consecration in our life. We ought not to stay in the shadows of sorrow--but should come again to the place of service and duty. We ought not to permit our tears to flow for long--but should turn our grief quickly into new channels of loving devotion and active usefulness. When we come again after our time of sorrow or pain, our face should shine as did the face of Moses when he came down from the mount. The comfort that God gives--puts deep new joy into the heart, and anoints the mourner with a new baptism of love and power. We must be sure to get true comfort when we are in tribulation, for then our tribulation will help to fit us for the glory of heaven.

In the vision of the Apocalypse, we see earth's mourners beyond all their tribulation. Suffering is not to last always. If we are Christ's disciples, we are going through it; we must go through it to reach heaven. Glory lies beyond the veil of sorrow, and we must go through the dark stream to reach it. But it is only a narrow stream, and soon we shall have crossed it and shall be beyond it forever! In the wonderful shepherd Psalm, we read of passing through the valley of shadows. The shepherd leads his flock through the gloomy valley--to reach pasture and shelter on the other side. Beyond our sorrows--we shall find blessedness. The pain of earth will be forgotten, in the joy of heaven, and the joy of heaven will be richer

and sweeter because of earth's pain!

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