

In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Dearly Beloved by God, suffering is not enjoyable. But that doesn't mean that it's never beneficial.

Normally, when we think of suffering, we place it in the "bad" column;

if our whole existence is to live an enjoyable life now, then suffering cannot be a "good."

But as our Epistle reading mentioned: it **'is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly.'**

Now how can Paul say that? Does that mean that the Lord loves to see people, in general, and His people, in particular, suffer? Is that how He gets His thrills?

This is not what we hear in our text from the Book of Judges, nor from the rest of Scripture...

... We read as follows in Jesus' name:

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And all that generation also were gathered to their fathers. And there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord or the work that He had done for Israel.

And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals. And they abandoned the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the Lord to anger. ... And He sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies....

Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them.... For the Lord was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them....<sup>(ESV)</sup>

*This is Your Word, heavenly Father; **sanctify us in the truth, Your Word is Truth.** Amen.* <sup>(John 17:17)</sup>

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The people's afflictions and oppressions moved the Lord to pity.

And that pity moved Him to action in sending judges to save them.

Of course, some might contend that it was the Lord who had caused the suffering in the 1<sup>st</sup> place.

After all, wasn't it the Lord who **sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies?**

Wasn't it the Lord **who was against them for harm?**

We are to realize that there are two reasons for suffering, & we need to distinguish between them.

This task is difficult because the suffering and pain and oppression looks identical.

A believer and an unbeliever can suffer under the same circumstances,

but for the believer it is a chastening, a discipline, a test, a cross that he bears in faith,

while for the unbeliever, it is a consequence and just punishment for his sin.

The desire of God for both of them, is that they would humble themselves, repent of their sins, and firmly believe in His salvation through Jesus Christ so that they might live

in *everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness.* <sup>(Small Cat. 2nd Article/Expl.)</sup>

In our text, we hear of Israel suffering justly because they, as a nation, had broken God's covenant.

We hear of how they did **evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals.**

**They bowed down to them... and abandoned the Lord.**

Now, we recognize there were some believers among them, as the story of Naomi and Ruth show,

But as a nation, we would identify them, no longer as believers, but as unbelievers.

The suffering they endured, again, as a nation, was punishment for their idolatry,  
and all the harlotry and sin that came as a result of it.

Even when **the Lord raised up judges who saved them... they did not listen to their judges.**

They refused to listen to the Lord, to obey His commandments, to be called solely by His name.

But how did this happen after only a generation or two?

They had not driven out the inhabitants from the land, or wiped out their idolatrous worship.

After the initial conquest of the land of Canaan, each tribe was to take up its own possession,  
and as they grew in the land, take out the remnants of the nations that remained.

Because they had let the other nations remain, those nations became a stumbling block to them.

And really we hear that this affected the younger generation, don't we?

... Not of the older generations, the ones who had seen the mighty acts of salvation by the Lord,  
the ones that were so convinced that He was their gracious Redeemer.

These generations were described as having been obedient to the Lord, walking in His way.

But the younger generation grew up in different experiences.

Though they had, no doubt heard the just and gracious Word of the Lord

from their parents and grandparents, from their priests and Levites,

They hadn't been trained by the same chastenings and crosses.

They hadn't lived in the time of severe testing in the wilderness.

They hadn't lived through the miraculous preservation of the nation under Moses.

They hadn't lived through the obedient Conquest of the land with their parents/grandparents.

Meaning that their faith had not been purified in those same fires of adversity.

Those trials that the older generations lived through, as God's Word was impressed upon them,  
had a way of solidifying one's faith in the Lord.

When you see the seriousness with which God hates sin, and carries out His just condemnation  
upon those who rebelled against Him...

when you see His grace in forgiving you so freely after you have disobeyed Him so openly...

when you see that all your provisions can and do come only from *His fatherly divine goodness*...

when you see Him fulfill His promises time after time in the most impossible of circumstances...

you know and recognize Him, and Him alone, as the one true God.

You need no other god. You desire no other gods.

But those first younger generations after the conquest didn't have those experiences.

They grew up in relative security and ease,

living under the Lord's blessings of the obedience of the older generations.

The nations were subdued and living in fear of them, which humbled those nations... for a time.

So those other nations didn't seem like a spiritual threat to them.

Perhaps they thought their parents' & grandparents' warnings about them were exaggerated.

They seemed like nice enough people. In fact, they grew up and made friends with them.

Those nations had religious festivals and celebrations, like the Israelites did.

They had those old stories about how the world came to be and about a worldwide flood.

They weren't the same stories, but how can you tell which one is true anyway?

And their friends' religion was much more inclusive.

You could believe in Baal and Ashtaroth, and others, including Yahweh, Israel's God.

Their friends' religion was more alluring to the **passions of the flesh**.

It sanctified and legitimized the unfaithful carnal lusts that **war against your soul**.<sup>1Peter2:11</sup>  
And so the younger generations were enticed by the false religions of those around them.  
They did not naturally inherit the same knowledge, experience and orthodox filters  
that their parents had been trained into through God's Word and life experiences.  
And so they did not know or perceive the same threats to their spiritual life.

But this is not just a "them" thing. This is an "us" thing.

We share the same corrupted flesh as the Israelites in the days of the judges.

We, too, have a carnal desire to live for the pleasures of this life, the passions of the flesh.

We, too, desire to avoid suffering, to live in ease... and it seems that the more we are blessed  
with relative ease and security, the more we want to avoid suffering, for any reason.

But this is spiritual suicide, if not for ourselves, then for our children and their children.

Now this isn't to say that we seek out suffering and develop martyr complexes,  
but that when suffering comes upon us we bear it in patient, prayerful faith.

Jesus tells us in the Gospels, **You will have sorrow...** He warns us... prepares us, for this fact of life.  
We are not promised as believers an earthly prosperity Gospel.

As many have experienced on varying levels, this sorrow does indeed include persecution  
because of our faith in Jesus, as Jesus spoke of to His disciples in today's Gospel.

And Jesus actually blesses us saying, **"Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you  
and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake, rejoice and be exceedingly glad."**

But our sorrow also includes the sufferings we endure as a result of the corruption of this world.  
Some of these sufferings we endure right along side with the unbelievers.

For the unbeliever, this is a punishment, an opportunity to see the worthlessness of his idols  
and seek the One true God who has taken pity on humanity in our suffering.

But for the believer, though it looks the exact same, it is a chastening, a cross we bear,  
for our spiritual and eternal good.

The cross is not a bad thing, except for our old Adam, our inherited sinful nature.

To him, the cross means death.

A sudden and significant drop in our nest egg, or complete loss of employment...

A slowly declining loss in ability or an abrupt loss of health through illness or injury...

A loneliness or depression, anxiety and fear over the uncertain future...

all these crosses, when borne in faith, are idols being torn down.

For the Christian, our crosses and sufferings are also a call to repentance.

It is an opportunity for us to examine our lives & see what idols we have let creep in,  
what we have put our trust in for security and comfort.

It is an opportunity to remember what we actually deserve from God for our guilt,  
but what Christ has taken upon Himself in our place as He willingly took up our cross.

To your new man, then, that regenerated spiritual life given to you by the Holy Spirit,  
the cross means life – it invigorates trust in the Lord's goodness and mercy and salvation,  
because in the time of suffering, you are deprived of your feelings of self-sufficiency,

then your idols prove powerless,  
then your independence and demand for control gives way to seeking help and salvation,  
not only from the current situation, but also from the corruption of this life.

It is precisely this earthly corruption and suffering, the **groaning because of our afflictions**  
that **moved the Lord to pity** and to action.

**Then the Lord raised up Jesus, who saved you out of the hand of those who plundered you,**  
who have taken your spiritual freedom, and left you with the tyranny of sin.

Though you try to avoid pain and suffering, the Son of God left His life of eternal peace and rest,  
to be born into our world of corruption and sorrow.

He became your man of **sorrows, stricken, smitten, afflicted, crushed, wounded,**  
**oppressed,** <sup>Isaiah 53</sup> *crucified, died and buried.*

**Who for the joy that was set before Him** (the joy of your salvation and eternal rest in Him)  
willingly **endured the cross, despising the shame,**  
**and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God...**  
where He rules all things for your spiritual and eternal good.

The crosses and sufferings that He brings into your life are for your good.

They keep you focused on Him, your only source of forgiveness, life, and salvation.

Therefore, though they are not pleasant, and though you would never seek them out,  
**we, along with St. Paul, rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,**  
**and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,**  
**and hope does not put us to shame...**

For that hope is completely dependent upon the Lord's **goodness and mercy** that  
**pursues us all the days of our life,**  
**and you shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.** <sup>Psalms 23:6</sup>

Thanks be to God!

*Soli Deo Gloria*