

The Prophets – Suffering Affliction and Of Patience

Don Boyd

Are you suffering? Are you a faithful child of God and yet you have physical ailments that cause you pain every day? Are you suffering because you are a child of God and others call you names or may have even harmed you physically or caused you mental anguish with their words and actions? Are you suffering for the cause of Christ? The original readers of the book of James were experiencing person trials and afflictions for which James gave them wonderful instructions and examples of how to endure their suffering of afflictions with patience. These instructions are as relevant today as they were 2000 years ago.

Take, my brethren, the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience. Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy. (James 5:10-11)

James informs them, and us, to use the prophets that were spokesmen for the Lord as examples. They endured tremendous suffering of afflictions through their patience. Many prophets suffered greatly. Moses suffered many times as he led the Israelites to the border of the Promised Land. Jeremiah was warned by God that the kings, princes, priests, and people of Judah would fight against him (Jeremiah 1:17-19). Jeremiah was threatened and greatly afflicted in many ways because his message was unpopular. They spoke against him and refused to listen to his words (Jeremiah 18:18). They mocked and ridiculed him (Jeremiah 20:7). Jeremiah was physically abused as well. He was put in stocks (Jeremiah 20:2), chained (Jeremiah 40:1), placed in a pit and left to die, though rescued (Jeremiah 38:6-13), he suffered in many other ways.

Let us also look at a prophet that was contemporary with Jeremiah. His name is Ezekiel. Both men saw the downfall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. They were there when Nebuchadnezzar came in 606 B. C. and took many captives of Judah back to Babylon. Daniel and his three friends were among those taken captive at that time (Daniel 1:1-6). Because of the wickedness of His people, God sent Nebuchadnezzar back to Judah in 597 B. C. and more were taken captive and goodly vessels were taken from the temple (2 Chronicles 36:9-10). Ezekiel was taken away to Babylon at this time. Daniel, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel were all alive when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. (2 Chronicles 36:17-21).

Jeremiah was still in Jerusalem while Daniel and Ezekiel were both in Babylon: Daniel in the palace and Ezekiel in the country by the river Chebar (Ezekiel 1:1). All three men suffered afflictions in many ways, but we want to focus on one affliction that Ezekiel went through just before Jerusalem was destroyed.

God calls upon us to suffer affliction. Paul made that plain in 2 Timothy 3:12, “Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.” There is no “maybe” or “possibly,” the fact is that those who live godly will suffer. Affliction just comes with the territory of being faithful to God. Ezekiel was called on by God to suffer something that would leave him with an empty place in his broken heart. God had Ezekiel suffer this affliction so he could show the Jewish captives in Babylon just how evil the nation of Judah had been and God’s punishment that was required because of their wicked ways. What was this tremendous affliction Ezekiel was to suffer? Look at Ezekiel 24:15-27.

Notice God's instructions. "Son of man, behold, I take away from thee the desire of thine eyes with a stroke" (Ezekiel 24:16a). The desire of Ezekiel's eyes was his wife. The Hebrew word translated *stroke* is defined in *Wilson's Old Testament Word Studies* as: "to smite, usually of Jehovah as inflicting judgments upon men, mostly with some fatal disease or death" (423). God, Who holds our breath in his hand (Daniel 5:23), was going to take the life of Ezekiel's wife. She was going to die, which was bad enough, but God would not allow him to mourn for her "yet neither shalt thou mourn nor weep, neither shall thy tears run down" (Ezekiel 24:16b).

God commanded Ezekiel "Forbear to cry, make no mourning for the dead" (Ezekiel 24:17a) though it is natural to cry when such a dear loved one dies; "bind the tire of thine head upon thee" (Ezekiel 24:17b) though it was their custom to remove the hat from the head and put dust and ashes upon themselves (Joshua 7:6). God told Ezekiel "and put on thy shoes upon thy feet" (Ezekiel 24:17c) when mourners customarily went barefoot (2 Samuel 15:30). Ezekiel was told "and cover not *thy* lips" (Ezekiel 24:17d) though the covering of the lips was a sign of mourning and astonishment (Micah 3:7). God forbid Ezekiel "and eat not the bread of men" (Ezekiel 24:17e). Food was brought to the family at death then just as it is today. Ezekiel was not to take any comfort offered to him when his wife died. He was to get up, get dressed, and get on with his work without showing any outward sign of mourning. That would be terribly hard to do!

Ezekiel 24:18 informs us of her death and in verse 19 the people were puzzled by Ezekiel's actions, "And the people said unto me, Wilt thou not tell us what these *things are* to us, that thou doest so?" Do you not also want to know why God would require such suffering of affliction by Ezekiel? The answer is given in verse 24, "Thus Ezekiel is unto you a sign: according to all that he hath done shall ye do: and when this cometh, ye shall know that I *am* the Lord GOD." Ezekiel was a sign to the Jewish captives of how they would react when Jerusalem, the desire of their eyes, was destroyed by Babylon (Ezekiel 24:21). They would do as Ezekiel did (Ezekiel 24:22-23). It was foretold that one would escape from Jerusalem and tell of its destruction in Ezekiel 24:26-27 and it came to pass in Ezekiel 33:21. Ezekiel must have had great courage and patience to obey God's commands and be a sign for his nation.

How many of us would be willing to give up our precious mate in order to obey God's commands? How many of us would suffer afflictions in order to be pleasing to God? All too often we feel *afflicted* when someone says something we do not like or we think we are *suffering* when we are corrected for our mistakes. We would rather run from our responsibilities to God than face anything we consider affliction of any kind, whether real or imagined.

Ezekiel gives us the example of a faithful man that was willing to suffer for God's cause no matter what it cost him in this life. He knew that the faithful follower of God will be blessed eternally. That is all that matters!

James specifically mentions Job as an example of enduring great suffering of affliction through patience. "Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy" (James 5:11b). The Bible describes Job in this manner, "There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil" (Job 1:1). Job was a righteous man; the main desire of his life was to please God. "Neither have I gone back from the commandment of his lips; I have

esteemed the words of his mouth more than my necessary *food*" (Job 23:12). Job had a wonderful life. He believed in God and was faithful to Him. We are introduced to Job's family in Job 1:2, "And there were born unto him seven sons and three daughters." Job's wealth is described in verse 3, "His substance also was seven thousand sheep, and three thousand camels, and five hundred yoke of oxen, and five hundred she asses, and a very great household; so that this man was the greatest of all the men of the east." Job was prominent socially in the community (Job 29:2-11; 21-23). When Job spoke, people listened. Job's deeds of kindness are shown (Job 28:12-18). But, Job was ruined financially, his children were unmercifully destroyed, and his health was brought to ruin. Why? Satan got involved in Job's life and tried to destroy him spiritually.

Satan had two confrontations with God about Job. The first is found in Job 1:6-12. Satan then begins his dastardly deeds against Job. He ruins Job economically (Job 1:13-17). When we lose our jobs or our wealth, do we blame God? "I thought God loved me." "I cannot care for my family because of what God did to me." We need to stop and think that Satan is the culprit, not God. Satan then murdered Job's children (Job 1:18-19). How many people lose someone special in their lives and then turn their backs on God? Ezekiel is a prime example of one that continues to trust God when a loved one dies. We need to remember that Satan was the murderer of the human family from the beginning (John 8:44). Man's sin brought death into the world (Romans 5:12; Hebrews 2:14-15). We cannot blame God for the death that is in the world. He tried to warn Adam and Eve, but they wouldn't listen. There is no reason to think that we could have done any better.

Notice Job's response to everything that had just happened to him, "Then Job arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped, And said, Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD. In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly" (Job 1:20-22). Job did not know that Satan was behind his demise. Job accepted what happened to him and did not blame God for being unjust.

Satan failed this time, so he tries again. Satan never gives up! Look at Satan's second confrontation with God about Job (Job 2:1-6). Satan then wrecked Job's health. We see what Satan did in several verses throughout the book of Job. "So went Satan forth from the presence of the LORD, and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown. And he took him a potsherd to scrape himself withal; and he sat down among the ashes" (Job 2:7-8).

Many other characteristics of Job's extreme suffering are shown to us in the book of Job. Job was subject to tossing and turning in the night while his flesh was infested with worms and his wounds oozing: "When I lie down, I say, When shall I rise up? But the night is long, and I am full of tossings, until the twilight of the dawn. My flesh is clothed with worms and clods of dust; my skin is broken and is loathed" (Job 7:4-5). Job was consumed with exhaustion and his body was shriveled and thin: "But now he hath made me weary: Thou hast made desolate all my company. And thou hast laid fast hold on me, *which* is a witness *against me*: And my leanness riseth up against me, It testifieth to my face" (Job 16:7-8 ASV). Job fully expected to die from his disease and his eyesight worsened: "My breath is corrupt, my days are extinct, the graves *are ready* for me...Mine eye also is dim by reason of sorrow, and all my members *are* as a shadow" (Job 17:1, 7). Job's skin was devoured by his disease: "It shall devour the strength of his skin: *even* the

firstborn of death shall devour his strength” (Job 18:13). Job’s breath was horrible, he was abhorred by others, and he was but skin and bone:

My breath is strange to my wife, though I intreated for the children's *sake* of mine own body. Yea, young children despised me; I arose, and they spake against me. All my inward friends abhorred me: and they whom I loved are turned against me. My bone cleaveth to my skin and to my flesh, and I am escaped with the skin of my teeth. (Job 19:17-20)

Job had bone-piercing pain at night, skin discoloration, and intense fever: “My bones are pierced in me in the night season: and my sinews take no rest. By the great force of *my disease* is my garment changed: it bindeth me about as the collar of my coat...My skin is black upon me, and my bones are burned with heat” (Job 30:17-18, 30).

The characteristics of Job’s disease seem to be descriptions of what is probably *elephantiasis* (a developed form of leprosy). Job was enduring excruciating suffering which lasted for months. “So am I made to possess months of vanity, and wearisome nights are appointed to me” (Job 7:3). “Oh that I were as *in* months past, as *in* the days *when* God preserved me” (Job 29:2).

Job received no emotional help while suffering the affliction of this excruciating disease. Job’s wife discouraged him: “Then said his wife unto him, Dost thou still retain thine integrity? curse God, and die” (Job 2:9). Notice that Satan allowed her to live. She would be useful to his plan to get Job to curse God. Job’s friends did not even recognize him when they saw him: “Now when Job’s three friends heard of all this evil that was come upon him, they came every one from his own place; Eliphaz the Temanite, and Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite: for they had made an appointment together to come to mourn with him and to comfort him. And when they lifted up their eyes afar off, and knew him not, they lifted up their voice, and wept; and they rent every one his mantle, and sprinkled dust upon their heads toward heaven” (Job 2:11-12). They failed to help Job and greatly discouraged him. Eliphaz accused Job of whining: “Thy words have upholden him that was falling, and thou hast strengthened the feeble knees. But now it is come upon thee, and thou faintest; it toucheth thee, and thou art troubled” (Job 4:4-5). Job would still be suffering from the loss of his children and Bildad told Job that if he and his family had been faithful to God, God would not have killed them and punished you:

Doth God pervert judgment? or doth the Almighty pervert justice? If thy children have sinned against him, and he have cast them away for their transgression; If thou wouldest seek unto God betimes, and make thy supplication to the Almighty; If thou wert pure and upright; surely now he would awake for thee, and make the habitation of thy righteousness prosperous. (Job 8:3-6)

Zophar accused Job of being such a great sinner that Job was fortunate God did not punish to the full extent of what Job deserved:

Should thy lies make men hold their peace? and when thou mockest, shall no man make thee ashamed? For thou hast said, My doctrine is pure, and I am clean in thine eyes. But oh that God would speak, and open his lips against thee; And that he would shew thee the secrets

of wisdom, that *they are* double to that which is! Know therefore that God exacteth of thee *less* than thine iniquity *deserveth*. (Job 11:3-6)

Job was suffering excruciating physical torment and agonizing mental anguish, yet Job remained faithful: "But he said unto her, Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil? In all this did not Job sin with his lips" (Job 2:10). God called Job His servant: "And it was so, that after the LORD had spoken these words unto Job, the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite, My wrath is kindled against thee, and against thy two friends: for ye have not spoken of me *the thing that is right*, as my servant Job *hath*" (Job 42:7).

Many a person has turned their back on God and rejected Him because they lost their health. "If God really loved me, He would not allow this to happen to me!" "Where was God when I fell from that pole!?" "God is evil because of the pain He is putting me through!" "God is just a schoolyard bully trying to get more on His side than Satan has on his side. I don't want any part of Him!"

We need to understand that suffering comes into our lives for various reasons:

- (1) We may be like Job: God's # 1 example of righteousness; "Exhibit A."
- (2) We may be like Israel and Judah: punishment to bring us to repentance.
- (3) We may suffer for our past sins: cirrhosis of the liver; venereal disease.
- (4) We may suffer for the sins of others: drunk drivers, terrorists.

We can never rightly accuse God of being unjust in this world! We need to have the attitude that we will serve God to the best of our physical ability, no matter how much or how little that physical ability is and accept what comes our way. Job and the prophets understood that and did their best even though they suffered greatly. We must always understand that God is worthy to be served just because of Who He is!

There are blessings come from faithfulness. God blessed Job doubly:

And the LORD turned the captivity of Job, when he prayed for his friends: also the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before. Then came there unto him all his brethren, and all his sisters, and all they that had been of his acquaintance before, and did eat bread with him in his house: and they bemoaned him, and comforted him over all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him: every man also gave him a piece of money, and every one an earring of gold. So the LORD blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning: for he had fourteen thousand sheep, and six thousand camels, and a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand she asses. He had also seven sons and three daughters. And he called the name of the first, Jemima; and the name of the second, Kezia; and the name of the third, Kerenhappuch. And in all the land were no women found so fair as the daughters of Job: and their father gave them inheritance among their brethren. After this lived Job an hundred and forty years, and saw his sons, and his sons' sons, *even* four generations. So Job died, *being* old and full of days. (Job 42:10-17)

Job had great patience to endure the tremendous afflictions he went through and he never turned his back on God.

The faithful prophets suffered affliction, Job suffered affliction, and so will we if we are faithful to God. We will suffer in our lives. Jesus declared:

Blessed *are* they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when *men* shall revile you, and persecute *you*, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great *is* your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you. (Matthew 5:10-12)

Paul wrote to Timothy: "Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution" (2 Timothy 3:12). Peter wrote: "But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters. Yet if *any man suffer* as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf" (1 Peter 4:15-16). There are many who suffer in this world because of their worldly ways and they deserve what they receive because they have done wrong. Peter is saying that suffering as a Christian is not suffering because of wrong-doing, but because of right-doing. You have done nothing wrong if you suffer affliction because you are Christ-like life. Christ was hated by worldly people and so are we. He told His disciples: "If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you" (John 15:19). If we are hated by the world we will suffer affliction just like the prophets of old: "Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great *is* your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you" (Matthew 5:12).

Our eternal home will be worth all the suffering we endure in this world. Paul wrote: "For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time *are* not worthy *to be compared* with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18). Paul endured great suffering of affliction (2 Corinthians 11:24-28). He bore the marks of his suffering in his body (Galatians 6:17). The Christian life will not be a bed of roses. Paul wrote the following words of encouragement to Timothy: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished *my* course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing" (2 Timothy 4:7-8). The Christian life is a battle. We fight against temptation every day. The Christian life is a race. Only those who finish the race, which requires stamina, will receive the crown. We must remain faithful to God to receive the crown of life. Never allow Satan to discourage you: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 15:58).

God is worthy to be served just because of Who He is and we will suffer affliction if we serve Him, but the afflictions we suffer cannot even compare to the eternal reward that is waiting. The prophets and Job are great examples of steadfastness and patience for us to follow in our lives. They were discouraged by events, friends, and family, but never relinquished their integrity. When the troubles of this life seem to try to overwhelm you, turn to God for strength. Follow James' instructions and look to the examples of the faithful prophets and Job to help you endure your suffering of afflictions.

Works Cited

Wilson, William (nd). *Wilson's Old Testament Word Studies*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers.