



Dancing

IN THE

Flames

***The Lost Art
of Suffering***

michael tummillo

"I have just finished reading: "Dancing in the Flames." I was very impressed. I thought it was a masterly treatment of a difficult but necessary theme. I love the passion and personal touches, but it also extremely clear and lucid. And concise. A lot of Christian books seem far too long, in my opinion. It's as if the author had enough of an idea for a valid booklet, but felt constrained to expand the material into a book. You didn't. Good discipline.

"I will definitely be passing it on for reading to other people whose opinion I value in such matters....It isn't just the American Church that needs to hear this message, although maybe the extremes are more obvious there. All flesh seeks its own comfort and easily avoids embracing the cross daily. Keep faithful to the message. It is genuinely "encouraging," i.e., it puts courage into me to be someone I would not otherwise be. For that I thank you and God."

***Philip Orchard, Bible Teacher
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Introduction: The Case for Suffering.

There is one aspect of the Christian faith which we hear very little about these days, yet it has served as a pillar of our faith from Christianity's inception. Once Reverend Feelgood mans his Plexiglas pulpit next Sunday morning, across this nation, one would be hard-pressed to ever hear him sermonize on this one, grossly neglected mystery which, once the magnitude of its importance is grasped, would revolutionize the lives of scores of believers in Christ. I dare say, they would only THEN have real life.

What is this enigma? In a word: *Suffering*.

Did I lose anybody yet? We hate that word in the Western world. We prefer stopping to smell the roses over embracing the thorns any day.

Suffering...try and smile when you say that.

For many, suffering is something that the African missionary spoke about when they testified at church. "My Lord, it's terrible the way those poor people get treated over in them other places, ain't it LouAnne? Love your hair...by the way, Brother 'n Sister Godley wanted us to go with 'em to the cafeteria after services this mornin'. Says he has some real important information about that situation we was talkin' 'bout with Sister Fern at the parlor last Saturday...can you come...?"

To the Western Christian, though there are exceptions, the extent of our suffering generally amounts to little more than having to contend with those darned wooden pews just one more month until the new, overstuffed, stackable chair shipment arrives. Or the compressor on the air conditioner that needs to get fixed for the sanctuary. Or our lack of help with the children's ministry. Or wanting to leave these dead-end jobs of ours.

You get the picture. Of course, many of our sufferings are self-inflicted. Bad relationship choices. Bad business decisions. Bad health habits. It's called reaping as we've sown. Often it's merely sabotaging one's own life.

The Bible says we will suffer for the sake of righteousness. *"Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,"* (2 Timothy 3:12). Jesus made at least half-dozen references to His followers being killed for their relationship with Him. Another half-dozen times He told them they'd be hated, once saying their enemies would be the members of their own households.

In other words, bad things will happen to you as a result of your right-standing with God. Anyone who has put faith in the blood of Jesus Christ shed for the remission of their sins at the cross is NOW in right-standing, righteous, in the eyes of the Father.

Jesus said, *"in this life you will have many troubles... ."*

You can say THAT again, Lord!

The Apostle Paul never once established a church where he wasn't eventually run out of town, imprisoned, beaten, shipwrecked, challenged. Every church he established was on its own, literally as sheep among wolves, from the get-go. In the New Testament alone, simply by looking at the lives of its key figures...Stephen, Paul, Peter, John the Baptist, James, and of course, Jesus Himself... suffering is a common element.

If you're suffering right now, you're in great company. If you're not suffering now, you WILL be in the future for this is the means by which God expands, refines and purifies His Church.

It's OK! A pregnant woman suffers the pains of labor prior to a miraculous new birth, right? In fact, that final stage of childbirth is referred to as the "transition" stage. Are you in transition? That's a very painful phase of birth when something that was virtually heretofore non-existent suddenly springs onto the scene.

And everything changes.

Consider this: everything we ever do will be tested. Without a fire, how will the wood, hay and stubble be burned away to reveal the real strength of a thing... a congregation, a marriage, a business, a ministry? Jesus Himself was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness TO BE TESTED by the devil. You see, even Jesus had to test His metal. Trial by fire is not a bad thing, even though it hurts. Satan can give us his best shot but, folks, he ALWAYS shoots himself in the foot.

Without exception.

Mark these words: Fire will come! Count on it. We hear a great deal about the Refiner's Fire these days in The Church. We pray for Revival Fires and speak and sing about the Fire of the Holy Spirit. What if that fire comes to your church in the form of a church split over doctrinal issues or an issue of pastoral infidelity?

What if that fire comes to your personal life in the form of an adulterous spouse, a gossiping friend, or the loss of a substantial income?

What if your business feels the heat of that fire in the way of a sensational media attack or a class-action lawsuit?

Have we been adequately warned... adequately TRAINED...to handle these life altering events?

Have our minds been renewed to the necessity of suffering?

A friend recently attempted to get her liquor license for her upscale dining establishment and was denied - for the third time. With no more fight left in her, she opted to close down. Less than a week later, her brother was killed in a plane crash in Afghanistan. Will she hang on to Jesus, or blame God? The test has come.

Strangely, amidst all the preaching and singing about “Holy Fire,” there can still be heard the simultaneous prayer and supplications about “Peace in our congregation.”

Sorry, we can't have both.

Not for long.

Here's the FACT: the fire WILL come! If there is to be any peace, it will be an inner peace, knowing that Jesus is in control, sleeping in the bottom of the boat while the storm rages. Though the ministry is being dismantled, your dreams are crumbling, your marriage is being strained, your life's work systematically, even unjustly, destroyed before your very eyes, peace can be attained.

The viewpoint I'm about to submit will NOT be popular. It flies in the face of our modern culture (that ALONE should tell us there could be some merit to it!) as well as the modern “you can do it!” teachings of the New Age Movement which has permeated The Church.

Read it.

Pray about it.

It comes from the heart of one who, himself, has suffered. I have learned to embrace not only suffering but, also, as a result, have learned to embrace those who suffer.

Our hearts MUST be broken for these.

I have studied the Church through its bloody history of suffering. Even when it's been self-imposed through disobedience, immorality, fueled by greed or jealousy, suffering has always bred more suffering - the needless suffering of the innocent by-stander, or the torture and subsequent slaying of those who would not embrace false doctrines. Through it all, through all of this suffering, this...this... stoking of the Refiner's Fire...when the ashes have settled, The Church...the TRUE Church...has held fast! No, I'm not talking about the buildings, the ministries, the pews, the tapes and books in the foyer, etc. I'm talking about the smoking,

charred stones of the Church, the *Ekklesia*, the “called out ones,” standing tall amidst the scorched, still smoldering remains of hay, wood, and stubble.

Just as Nehemiah rebuilt his wall using burned stones, so the Kingdom of God is built using those living stones that have been through the fire; real Christians that have passed the test - Catholic and Protestant believers - whose robes of righteousness have been blackened from the flames.

The Kingdom of God is within! It’s not made up of brick and mortar. From its inception, the Church, the “called out ones” of the Lord Jesus Christ, have emerged from the fires of suffering and have marched forward to suffer what could only be perceived as yet another apparent defeat.

Followed by another. And another. The moments of glory seem so few and far between.

Or, could it be that we are to glory in our suffering?

Could be.

Or, does the glory come from God’s presence in the midst of our sufferings? “*If we suffer, we shall also reign with Him,*” (2 Timothy 2:12). Reign in the here and now, Christian... not waiting for the sweet bye ‘n bye. Paul showed us that his sufferings were a tool to bring others to salvation (2 Corinthians 1:6).

Tell me, could the death of Christ on the cross be labeled as a defeat? It sure appeared that way at the time.

The Romans thought so.

The Pharisees thought so.

The disciples thought so.

The devil, too.

“Christ, who suffered for you, is your example, that you should follow in His steps...,” (1 Peter 2:21). *“For the joy set before Him, He endured the cross,”* (Hebrews 12:2).

He knew it had to be so.

For that moment in time.

For the sake of the Kingdom.

In the midst of trials, we should not ask, “Why, Lord?” Rather, we should ask “Am I willing and obedient?” See, though Daniel was willing to become the main course for those hungry lions, so were the Christians who died for Nero’s pleasure. The fact that while Daniel survived and other Saints did not does not change the willingness of his heart. As I Samuel 16:7 says, *“Man looks at the outside but God looks at the heart.”*

God offers strength in time of need, regardless of outward intervention, and creates a witness to His glory through the obedience of the faithful servant. It’s the obedience that creates the witness, NOT THE ACT. The three Hebrew children stood before the fiery furnace, were prepared to burn if God chose not to rescue them. Still they said, *“But if not...”*

Christians are burned to death in many countries today (80% of all Christians are NOT in America, by the way, and they’re literally dying to serve Jesus). In every case, these testimonies are equally glorious examples of obedience to God.

Paul said, *“Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, works for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory,”* (2 Corinthians 4:17). He also said, *“So, do not be ashamed to testify about the Lord...but join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God...,”* (2 Timothy 1:8). Paul’s imprisonment wasn’t a defeat. Hardly. God knew he needed the solitude so he could catch up on a little letter writing, that’s all (namely, what would become the major portion of the New Testament!).

You see, in the Kingdom of God, the way up is down. It’s an upside-down King

dom where the first are last, the last are first, and where we are taught by His example to love those who hate us. It's a Kingdom where one must lose their life in order to find it. It's foolishness to the wise.

In the following paragraphs, using scriptural examples as well as my own experience with suffering, I will do my level best to illustrate this point and to give practical instruction regarding "the lost art of suffering." My prayer is that you will, as I have, come to understand the purpose of suffering, and embrace it whenever it comes.

Jesus said, "In this life you will have many troubles, but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world."

Be of good cheer!

Rejoice in the Lord ALWAYS...even in our sufferings.

Dance with joy that you've been given the overcoming grace to stand in the midst of the fire.

Do not be surprised when you, too, find yourself dancing in the flames!

Suffering at the Hands of Our Brothers.

I call it “Cain-and-Abel-ism.” Say it fast and it sounds a bit like “cannibalism,” best defined as people devouring other people. Keep this in mind as you read this chapter.

At the risk of offending any denominational sensitivities, I have opted to refer to the various organized denominations of Church history as “Group A” or “Group B” rather than using the labels they actually carry today.

Also, at the risk of boring anyone with Church history, I’ve opted not to mention much of it here. At the risk of coming across as a know-it-all, when I realize I actually know so little, I will resist the urge to impress, thereby lessening the odds of making a fool of myself. As a Christian, I am an expert at only one thing: my own relationship and experiences with God. I can speak knowledgeably about this and little else.

Suffice it to say, mankind has always had the desire to manage things, to organize, to structure. I recall a remarkable Sunday evening where I was teaching a group of singles. I felt it was God’s will for us to divide into small groups in which we would minister to each other. The result was incredibly edifying and the presence of God was everywhere! It was phenomenal.

The next week, having experienced such a mighty manifestation of God by using the aforementioned technique, I chose to give it a go once again.

It was a flop.

What did I do wrong? I was trying to manage what I soon realized was a one-time move of God, tailored to the needs of one group, one time. That evening was not unlike the manna in the wilderness...I tried to make it last longer than the time for which it was intended and it bred worms and stank up the place!

There was a move of God across America which drew hundreds of thousands of men across the nation, packing stadiums from coast to coast. A fancy logo on an over-priced polo shirt and a “gimme” cap and the ministry was under way! Then they filed bankruptcy.

For such things we can blame the devil, blame ourselves, blame Adam & Eve, if we like. The fact is suffering, will come! The exam WILL be given to see who passes the test.

When we take the things of God and try to make them the things of man, it is sin. Suffering on one level or another has always come as a result. So it is when man attempts to “manage” the Body of Christ. Once the early Church was up and running, persecution came immediately. Suffering was just part of “The Way,” as it was called.

About 300 years into Christian history, Group A emerged. Twelve hundred years later, another group, Group B, split from Group A’s ranks. Though both groups have since spread all over the world, their sub-groups bear only slight resemblance to each other all over the world today. Same God. Same Jesus. Same Bible, basically. Major divisions.

Groups A & B, organized as they were, have never been the only two teams in the league. There has always been a Group C made up of Christians who did not like the looks of organized religion, or disagreed with the other group’s doctrinal slants. They have existed from the start and century after century, their story has never changed. They wanted nothing but Christ as they fellowshiped, as they worked. They desired nothing but the fullest experience of the Body of Christ.

Sounds peachy, doesn’t it? Wait, there’s more.

Their methods may have varied from group to group, too. Still do. No, they were not perfect. Sometimes they were quite peculiar in their ways, coming up with their own questionable doctrinal positions. But they did their best to remain obedient to the Word of God. And while Group A persecuted Group B, both groups have always persecuted Group C (which, incidentally, never named themselves as denominations. Their names came from others, just as, the early Church was first called “Christians” at Antioch... called that, I believe, by those who observed them and ridiculed them for being “little Christs”).

When we refer to persecution, we’re not just talking about religious freedoms, or name calling. We’re talking bloodshed.

Genocide. Total annihilation. Great suffering.

Though the torture and killing of millions of Christians are attributed to Group A, Group B fared no better, having dished out a great amount of persecution itself. For the past 200 years, Group C has joined the cannibalistic frenzy as if it were the thing to do. Since Scripture reading became more commonplace by the late 1700's, Group C's loving little fellowships began to grow. Some left their own countries in order to flee religious persecution.

In the early 1800's, tragedy struck. The Church split became a normal part of Group C's existence. Enter a new kind of suffering to Group C. (Of course, Groups A & B were already experienced at this and had their own methods for eradication and prevention, neither of which really worked, by the way, without the use of force or intimidation, often in the form of manmade rules and regulations and erroneous doctrines that strayed so far from what the Church fathers believed or that the Scriptures taught.)

Note this: there's NEVER been a tidy move of God. EVER! Whether it's the world, the flesh, or the devil, there's one wonderful enigma that always sprang up as a result of this untidiness: Suffering. Its purpose? To burn away the chaff. To prune the branches.

Yes, the common element from the beginning of Church history has always been suffering. Group C's history may not have included as much physical death, but its hatred for other groups ran deeply, causing untold amounts of pain and suffering to this day. Hearts broken, faith shipwrecked, relationships severed, bitterness and unforgiveness everywhere. Cold wars and civil wars among the saints. Suffering throughout the Body of Christ on every hand!

Do you see what's ahead for you? For your family? For your Church? If you're going to march with this outfit, no one comes out unscathed. Obviously, when we dare to surround ourselves with other Christians, guess who will most likely be shooting at us? That's right, the ones we love and for whom we have laid our lives down.

Friendly fire is an ugly thing. We eat our young and shoot our wounded. We make new believers in our own image, show them how to act and dress in our services, teach them a new language... and we tell them they're now part of the Lord's army?

Some army, huh?

If anyone dares to pray that they could be more like Jesus, be prepared to lean your shredded, blood-soaked back against a rough hewn cross, to have your tired, quivering limbs pierced by cold, rusty nails at the hands of the ones you came to minister to, to have your beard plucked by those you only wanted to heal, to have a crown of thorns pressed into your scalp by those needing to know about Heaven as your own blood runs into your swollen eyes, to have your cheeks slapped and your face spit upon by those you wanted only to encourage. Do not forget the ones who, because they were too tired, never noticed the blood mingling with your sweat as you prayed the night before. Remember, too, these were the very friends who would soon deny they ever knew you at all.

Still want to be more like Jesus? Usually, we prefer the healing of the blind and the lame and walking on the water.

Have we learned from our past that suffering simply WILL come and that we have an enemy and he is usually US? I refuse to give the devil more credit than he deserves. After all, he can only function to the extent we allow him to.

Ask Paul: is safe passage possible? No. It never will be. It should NOT be!

Ask the disciples: How did peace come in the midst of that storm? Through CHRIST! ONLY through Christ.

Ask Jonah: Can a servant of God ever get away from his mission without suffering at least 3 days? Glub, gurble, bubble. (He said, "Impossible!").

Suffering, for the Christian, from the very first drop of Christ's blood as He prayed in the garden, has always been a way of life. Or, shall I say, the way of death?

You can tell those who've been "called out"...they do not fear death because they're dead already. They sit in the congregations of Group A, B & C even today. They love Jesus more than their own lives. They understand the purpose of suffering and they anxiously await its arrival. They see it coming and they advance to meet it like the charge of the Light Brigade. For the joy set before

them, they endure.

When these Kingdom people fall...and they DO fall... they fall FORWARD.

*“The kingdom of heaven suffereth **violence**, and the violent take it by force.”*
(Matt 11;12).

Some have said Christianity is a bed of roses.

So it is... thorns and all!

The Proving Grounds.

The proving of anything is generally a painful experience. One look at Job's dilemma is proof of that. Here was a man who, Satan argued as God was holding His heavenly council, only loved God because he had been so tremendously blessed by Him. Take away his blessings, allow him to suffer, challenged the fallen angel, and he would hate God.

Although we cannot agree with everything Job did and said while in the midst of his dismal circumstances, the bottom line was that he did NOT curse God. He held to his faith with both hands and was doubly blessed as a result.

Has your ministry been proven?

How about your marriage or your closest friendship?

What about your business?

How about your faith in God?

When the people saw the lightning and thunder, heard the trumpet and saw Mount Sinai in smoke, they begged Moses to speak to them himself. "F-f-f-orget God, Mo! We want to hear from YOU!" They were afraid that hearing from God would kill them! Moses responded, "*F...f...fear not. God has come to prove you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from s...s...sinning,*" (Exodus 20:20).

In other words, the awesome display of God's majesty was intended simply to fill them with abject fear. His desire was to enter into covenant with these people and, in order to do so, they had to be purified. There was a lot of gunk to break through after so many years without Him. He had to give them the full treatment!

Some of us, like Moses, need a burning bush to get our attention while others apparently require a burning mountain.

Today, we're under a new and everlasting covenant. Like the children of Israel,

we should still be concerned that hearing (or reading) what God has to say will still kill us. Actually, that's the one thing God has in common with Satan: both want to kill us. Though the devil wants us physically dead, the study of the Word of God is a tool the Lord uses to bring us to the point of dying to our carnal desires and wickedness. Purity of heart will be the result.

*“Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years **to humble you and prove you** in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep His commands?” (Deut 8:2).*

God did that? Yep, they were tested.

Note: if you fail one of God's tests, He will let you take it again.

And again.

In some instances, for 40 years!

Don't we want to know what we're made of?

Don't we want to get better?

Don't we want to go deeper with God - deeper than the 10-second blessing we hear so often at the dinner table or the one-minute prayer we say at bedtime before nodding off? If we call ourselves 'Christians,' there will come a day of testing and we will then prove not only to God, but to ourselves, where we are and just how far we've come since the last test.

One of the thrills of athletic participation is not only the competition, when all the hours of training are put to the test against others, but proving just how good of an athlete you really are to yourself, win or lose.

When King Saul agreed to allow spunky David to go out and fight Goliath, he said, *“Go, and the Lord be with you,”* 1 Samuel 17:37, but NOT before piling all of his own heavy, oversized battle gear all over the boy, exhibiting the lack of reliance upon God that would one day be his demise. David then stripped himself of the king's earthly protection declaring, *“I cannot go in these for I have not*

proved them,” (1 Samuel 17:39). Only THEN did he approach the giant, carrying his shepherd’s staff, five smooth stones from a nearby stream, his sling, and his faith in God...those things HAD been proven.

Often our suffering comes as a lack of intimacy with God. Our faith wavers.

1 Thessalonians 5:21 reminds us to, *“Prove all things; hold fast to that which is good.”*

Test things.

Check them out.

Filter them through the Scriptures.

Weigh them against the prophecies you’ve received.

Counsel with those God has given charge over you spiritually.

Gather the advice of those who know you intimately, family and friends. Relationships, career moves, relocating, business decisions, spiritual messages from ministers...all are worthy of a second opinion. If the Scripture encourages us to prove things, obviously it is the Father’s way of doing things and He intends it to be ours, too. So, as He proves us, let us prove all things concerning our lives as well.

Paul wrote: *“Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; prove yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you - unless, of course, you fail the test?”* (2 Corinthians 13:5-6).

As we face the suffering that will come our way, the tests that God allows for our own benefit, and the benefit of the Kingdom, let’s become good test-takers. Let’s endure to the next level.

Rest assured, God will not allow us to be tested beyond what we can bear and He will always provide a way of escape, according to 1 Corinthians 10:13. Like a loving father, helping his child to ride a bike for the first time, He’s there, running alongside, helping you, building your confidence. The tricycle was one

level, training wheels were another.

Now, you're flying, wind in your hair, breeze against your cheeks!

Will you fall?

Probably.

Many times.

Will your Father help you up, mending your scrapes and cuts when necessary?

You bet He will.

Do you get to start over?

Yep. Like most dad's, He will insist upon it.

Will you fall less often the more you try?

Naturally.

Will you ever teach anyone else to ride?

You better believe it... this ride is too great a thrill to keep to yourself!

Suffering Ridicule and Scorn.

In case anyone reading this should think that I am writing this out of my own hurt, that I might be writing my own lamentations about ‘suffering’ from the midst of some recent struggle, or unresolved unforgiveness, let me assure you, this is not an eye-witness report from the battlefield of my life.

Allow me to describe my state of being as I wrote this message some 8 years ago: I had been experiencing a steadily increasing personal revival over the previous two and one half, manifesting new, exciting gifts of the Spirit. I had recently received a pay increase at work, one which I requested and then negotiated for several perks, all of which were granted. The Lord had laid a new enthusiasm for evangelism on my heart and has used people to pour funds into my hands to purchase Bibles and tracts. My body had undergone an incredible healing for an “incurable” spinal disease which I had suffered from since age 28, the details of which I shall not elaborate upon just yet. I was in charge of the fruitful Children’s Ministry of my church and had truly experienced the joy of serving 30 of the most wonderfully cooperative, non-complaining volunteers on the face of planet Earth! I had four healthy, wonderful children, even my son with asthma has suffered little or no discomfort during the worst season of the year for that nuisance, etc.

How easy it was to rejoice at times such as those.

Have I experienced suffering?

You’d better believe it. I have had rocks thrown at me by kids as I ministered in bad neighborhoods.

I gave up my 13 year advertising career which I loved and, when I tried to re-enter that field, I was told my skills were no longer adequate.

I laid down talents I possessed.

I’ve had gangsters blow pot smoke in my face while I prayed for one of their own.

I've been humiliated in front of two church groups by two divorces, one while I was a pillar in church leadership, the other before my entire mobile home park neighborhood where I lived for 8 years who bid us farewell as a family, and saw me return all alone.

I've had doors slammed on me while witnessing, been cursed at, laughed at, mocked, patronized, talked about and thought to be "touched" in the head by people very dear to me, all because of my Christian zeal.

I've had my life threatened several times for doing the right thing for God.

I've had things stolen from me by people I took in off the streets.

I've been growled at by a demon-possessed woman (sorry, if you have trouble squeezing that one into your doctrine) and had co-workers report me to top management for "preaching."

I've sat before wealthy heads of corporations and the mayor of a city near Dallas, testifying to the grace of God, only to be belittled and patronized (though one such meeting with a mover & shaker took a detour when detectives barged in with her daughter in handcuffs).

I've had friends and relatives stop talking to me or ridicule me because of my relationship with Jesus, have had co-workers and neighbors scrutinize every thing I did or said, extending me absolutely zero grace, and have had both men and women defiantly try to lead me down the Broad Street of compromise, as if they were accepting some sort of demonic challenge.

I've sent out Gospel messages by eMail and, in return, received awful responses filled with foul language and threats. Some of these from other clergymen! Then I was unceremoniously banished from using an Internet Service Provider with whom I had done business since 1999 after having had my service suspended 25 times by complainers who did n't approve of my message, many of whom were "Christians."

I've had false charges made against me by a homeless woman whom I had visited while she was in jail and for whom I had found a job at the local University hand-

ling money, despite her being a convicted felon - based upon my word (she wound up in prison for 5 years on another charge).

All this for the sake of the Gospel.

Yes, I despaired of my own life at least once. I know the very literal stench of the spirits of Suicide and Divorce. My own father asked me why I wasn't seeing a "shrink" after all I'd been through.

Though others have been, I've never been whipped publicly.

I've never been tortured for my faith.

My children have never been taken as slaves nor has my Church been burned before my eyes.

I haven't lost close friends to death for their faith, suffered imprisonment or experienced forced relocation.

There are Christians around the world who are truly suffering for the sake of righteousness. Generally speaking, we are not them.

They count it a privilege to die for Christ.

In America, we struggle to live for Him.

I know of Believers in other nations who are asking why it is their friends are being tortured and killed for their faith, but not themselves, and wonder if they are not considered worthy to die for Christ.

Can we imagine?

I've seen a photo of girls and women of a Christian section of a town who were all raped and all their men beaten, tortured and killed.

I've read of entire villages where the Christian women's breasts were cut off by

their enemies in an effort to starve their babies, because they would not renounce Christ.

I've read about congregations who were made to stand by while their pastors were burned and tortured.

And killed.

I've heard a case of children's names being taken down, by policemen at a home Bible study, the list then given to their school principal, and the subsequent face slapping they received for attending, being threatened to receive the same if they returned.

I've seen photos of pastors whose churches were demolished by local police, the final picture being the pastor standing in tears amidst the broken remains of his church.

I've heard of a woman, imprisoned for her faith who, when told that many were praying for the persecuted church, said, "They must not pray for against our suffering! It is necessary for the entire Body of Christ!"

I read about a pastor who baptized his flock with his saliva on their foreheads through the bars of his cell (some American denominations would argue passionately against this mode of baptism).

We hear of occasional killings in America that are faith-related. There will be more. Most of our persecutions now have to do with prayer in school, at ball games or graduations. We might hear of an employee being fired for wearing a cross on their lapel, things like that.

Suffering will come.

Real suffering.

Tests MUST come.

Just ask Jesus. In the 4th chapter of Luke, the devil tested Him in the wilderness. Why should it be different for us? He was the firstfruits, remember? Scripture says that He came as an example and Ephesians says we are to be “imitators of Christ.”

How can we know what a thing is made of if it is not tested and proven? Funny, we want to share our TEST-imonies, forgetting they only come as a result of TESTS.

I know of a non-denominational church in Germany who was forced to pay back taxes for many years because the state religion decided they were a cult and were, therefore, undeserving of tax-exempt status.

American Church beware! As those of many nations can attest, the American Church is not immune to persecution. With all its overspending, back-biting, hypocrisy, secret sins, idolatries, false doctrines, and blatant compromises, after 200+ years as a nation, I contend that America’s had her run. The fire is a-fixin’ to fall on the U.S....religious freedom included.

From this suffering, The Church shall emerge from the ashes. The REAL Church. Not merely the church attenders or those who lay claim to BEING a Christian but bear no fruit.

Remember: real children of God have life everlasting. We may wind up looking more like The Church in a third world nation, meeting secretly, or disguised as a multi-level home product presentation, but we will survive.

And we will grow more than anyone could have ever imagined. The end shall not come until all have heard the Gospel.

We can pull our comforting “protection verses” out if we like, attempting to guarantee ourselves a painless Christianity... “No weapon formed against us will prosper!” Binding this and loosing that. Trusting Angels to do our bidding.

A Chinese Christian imprisoned for 20 years said, “Our churches in China are undergoing persecution; your churches in the West are undergoing delusion.”

Think about it: 80% of the world's Christians do NOT live in the West! Our Lazy-Boy theologians are perfecting their attractive teachings, designed to show their followers how to maintain our self-centered, comfortable lives.

WARNING! This is a test! That's right. This excessive abundance, which we in the Western world see as such a blessing - a type of reward - for lifting so high a standard of Christian righteousness, may well be a Holy Ghost set-up. Let's not kid ourselves. Would the flip-side of that be that the Christians who are suffering and dying are NOT worthy of the excess we have?

Give me a break.

It was said by Tertullian that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.

How true! We must pray that, as the Body of Christ sees the willingness of others to lay down their lives for Jesus, a harvest of like-minded, like-spirited onlookers will spring forth across this nation.

Let us not forget that the word martyr is Greek for 'witness.' We are all to lay down our lives for Christ, ceasing to exist for our own purposes. Paul said, "It is not I who live but Christ IN me."

Is that true for the rest of us?

Lord, let it be so.

Begin with me!

Suffering Physical and Emotional Pain.

America has more diseases, bodily malfunctions and maladies than any other nation. For all our advances, we're sick! Sure, we're living longer, but we're groaning every step of the way.

We're tops when it comes to the fields of drugs and medicine. Top surgeons in the world. But necessity is the mother of invention. We HAD to be the best... we're in the worst shape!

In other words, we HAD to develop in that field because we were killing ourselves with our own technology. Even our desire to get physically fit has spawned new professions and caused them to flourish. These include chiropractics, physical therapy, sports medicine, massage therapy and others. In our attempt to stay or get into shape, our ranks have been decimated with knee injuries.

In our attempt to excel in the market, whether in high rises or warehouses, we've produced legions of bad back and carpal-tunnel victims.

Speaking of "excelling in the market," the stress involved in staying on top has caused us to drink and drug ourselves to financial ruin in order to cope, costing American business over \$100 BILLION annually. Stressed and intoxicated men beat their wives, costing American business about \$4 BILLION annually. (Incidentally, more cases of spousal abuse are reported on Super Bowl Sunday than any other day. Scary.)

Consider these nuggets:

Almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of our foods did not exist 100 years ago.

We bleach our bread, eliminate the best part of orange juice and potatoes, and feed growth hormones to our livestock which we ingest.

We each eat enough sugar every year to sink a battleship and drink enough soft drinks to float one on.

We fill our living, working and educational facilities with asbestos and leaded paint, inhale the fumes of our transportation and factories, bulldoze our trees to build parking lots, poison our rivers (no, I don't consider myself an environmentalist, but it wouldn't hurt if more Christians were. Careful! Worship the Creator, not the creation! Let's make sure that, if we're going to focus on saving lives, they're human babies, first, owls and sea life, second).

We smoke, drink, take drugs, hurting not only our own bodies but those around us, including the unborn, not to mention the consequences that occur while we're "under the influence," theft, murder, rape, manslaughter, abortion.

We kill each other with guns and cars (2.8 million highway deaths attributed to substance abuse alone from 1900 to 1990 vs. 1.1 million deaths in ALL U.S. wars from 1776 to Vietnam) and teach our children to kill with the accuracy of snipers through hours of simulator training, i.e., video games (Military ballistics experts say the American infantry soldier greatly increased his effectiveness once they began shooting targets that looked like people. In contrast, on Civil War battlefields, over 90% of muskets were not even fired. It was simply not right to kill and they knew it. The casualties came from artillery. Subsequent wars were similar till the targets changed.)

We model dispute resolution through the media, preparing ourselves for confrontation through everything from Jerry Springer to sit-coms, professional wrestling to the big screen. The good guy is the one with the snappiest comeback line, or the one left standing, it seems.

Ain't we sophisticated? Ain't we civilized?

Question: Does any of this spill over into the American Church? See for yourself. Listen closely to Christian radio. Why the need for so many psychiatric treatment hospitals, biblically based counseling, weight control products, etc.?

Listen to (I mean, read) the lyrics of some of the Christian music your kids are listening to. Is it filled with hope and promise, or the heartaches, loneliness and confusion of a child in the midst of darkness?

Ask any minister and you'll discover a huge block of their time is spent counsel-

ing for emotional problems.

The Church is as sick as the rest of the nation. We not only need physical healing, which runs a close second to financial needs in any given Church service, but we need emotional and spiritual healing, too.

Start paying close attention to the subject matter of any Church altar call. Rarely is it for renewal, revival, for the grace needed to come to the end of ourselves. Physical and Financial needs get top billing most of the time.

Church splits, fragmented families, spiritual abuse, physical and emotional abuse, infidelity, rejection, loneliness, et al... since the beginning,

God's family has been dysfunctional since "The Beginning" and it still is.

Do we suffer as a nation? Yes.

As a Church? You bet.

As families and as individuals? Of course. Whether it's self-inflicted or not, it's still referred to as 'suffering.'

Will suffering go away? Not any time soon.

Then, how shall we handle this on Earth? If it's from the devil, shall we "bind" it or cast it out?

If it's from God, is it being "allowed?"

If it IS from God, could it be for our "good"? After all, we've been "...called according to His purpose."

Think about that...HIS purpose. Not our own. If Jesus is truly Lord of our lives, then His purpose IS our purpose, isn't it?

I have a dear friend who is almost 50 years old and suffers from severe rheuma-

toid arthritis. He's about 5' 9" and weighs 90 pounds. A terrific man of God, he is a father of two strapping boys and a wonderful wife. His body is thin, his joints are stiff and gnarled. Some have dared to say, "brother, repent of your sin and God will heal you!" Others have accused him of lacking faith.

His attitude? He believes God can heal him if that's His desire and has received a great deal of prayer. However, as one who has submitted his life to Christ, if his physical condition brings God more glory that way, he'd prefer to remain as he is!

I can attest, his condition HAS brought God a great deal of glory! The man is an inspiration whose condition truly makes believers say to themselves, "What am I complaining about?"

A Russian woman I read about, bed-ridden because of multiple sclerosis, was generally ignored by the KGB years ago. Amazingly, each day her husband would place a small typewriter on her chest so she could write. In her condition, it took several minutes to move from one key to the next. In time, undetected by the government police, she managed to interpret several of Billy Graham's books, the results of which were distributed by her husband.

She died the night after she completed her work.

Mission accomplished. Well done good and faithful servant! Like Moses' staff, God used that which she had at hand.

What do we have in OUR hands?

For those who have restrictive diseases or injuries who may think that it's easy for me to talk about physical suffering because I don't suffer that way, think again.

At age 28, suffering terribly from pain in my back, I was diagnosed with a spinal disease known as ankylosing spondylitis (A.S. for short). This was accompanied by periodic manifestations of its traveling buddy, iritis, which affected my eye sight.

Though largely healed from its potentially devastating effects at the time of this writing, the adventure began with a constant low-grade fever that left me feeling miserable most every day for several years. A thorough physical exam revealed

this rare, hereditary disease in my body. Stiffness in my back and hips made getting out of bed a horribly painful experience, not to mention several tearful episodes which came about just trying to rise out of the bath tub or off the floor.

Lying flat on a bed was a miserable experience. Forget stomach-sleeping, my favorite night-time posture. Sleeping in a chair, sitting up, hugging pillows was quite common for me. On top of this, x-rays revealed that I had a crushed disc in my spine which made things like sneezing, laughing, coughing an excruciating experience most of the time.

Although I was suffering a painful throb in my spine with each beat of my heart, even as I wrote this down, I must tell you that I believed myself to be one of the most joyful people on earth. I had learned that His ways are not mine. I had learned to relinquish control of my life, to abandon my plans for His. Though I relished the brief interludes of painlessness, I, too, had resigned myself to God's will. It's actually made life more exciting, in a weird sort of way!

Had I given up? Resigned myself to a life of pain? No way! "I'll take a healing, Lord, right now!" was my plea for help. Well-meaning people had told me that I'd be healed if I had more faith. I'd seen God do miraculous healings in others. He'd even healed people through my own ministry. I also became well aware that God was apparently more concerned with my character than my comfort. I cannot deny how closely these pains had driven me to a deeper life of faith in Christ. Though pain may have caused me to spend the night on the couch on many occasions, pain also caused me to pray while I was awake.

It helped to know that, just as no man killed Jesus, He gave His life willingly, so, too, no devil was tormenting me; I had given my body to God willingly. "*Indeed, in this house we groan [boy, did I!], longing to be clothed with our dwelling from Heaven.*" (2 Corinthians 5:2). My body is JUST a tent that will wear out with use and return to the dust anyway.

Until then, God has a plan and it's higher than anything I can imagine. It has already been more wonderful than anything I could have come up with. I cannot guess how many nights were interrupted by intense pain requiring that I move

from bed to chair to couch to hot bath. I cannot guess how many of those nights I wound up praying or reading Scripture and getting a message from the Father for broadcasting by eMail to the world.

The apostle John wrote in Revelation 12:11 that *“they overcome by the Blood of the Lamb.”* In the same verse, he writes that these overcoming martyrs *“did not love their lives unto death.”*

Romans 8:36-37 reveals that, as we are murdered, we are *“more than conquerors.”*

Father knows best. He wants to strengthen, not spoil His kids. Suffering does not separate us from Christ, for He said He will never leave us or forsake us. It actually carries us forward toward our ultimate goal.

The prize is before us, reason enough to endure our crosses now.

When the devil is not attacking, I learned a long time ago to ask, “God, don’t you trust me?”

Listen, all I know about spiritual warfare is this: Jesus is our example of the model Christian foot soldier, going person to person, demon to demon, in hand to hand combat. We are not to take on the demonic princes over a region. I have enough trouble, thank you! A soldier with a rifle does not take on heavy artillery. We take on heavy artillery with heavier artillery. Jesus never shouted at the demonic stronghold of Religion over Jerusalem, for example. God Himself will clear the atmosphere over a nation when His people *“humble themselves, pray, and seek His face. THEN He will hear from Heaven, forgive our sins and heal our land.”* (2 Chron 7:14).

After all, “Righteousness exalts a nation but sin is a disgrace to any people,” (Prov 14:34).

Satan always overplays his hand. What is intended for evil, God uses for good.

You’d think our enemies would have learned by now.

Then again, you'd think the Army of God would have learned something as well.

Too often our experiences are no more than just repeated mistakes.

Moment to Moment Dependence on Christ.

What is a Christian? Our word "Christ" comes from the Greek word "Cristos," the Anointed One. Jesus Christ is really Jesus, THE Christ, the Anointed King, the Head of The Body. The word, 'Messiah,' is the Hebrew version of 'Christ.' Hence, it's Jesus, THE Messiah.

You are not just a follower of Christ, but a little Anointed one.

Jesus, our King - as well as His early disciples - suffered for doing good. 1 Peter 4:1 tells us, "...since Christ suffered in His body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude [a willingness to suffer], because he who has suffered in His body is done with sin."

Done with sin? Sure! Suffering enables us to get our priorities straight. Things that seem so important become meaningless when we're suffering in some way. Besides, it's because of His suffering on the cross that there is no more Law for us to try and measure up to. Where there is no Law, there is no sin.

But I digress.

Serious suffering causes us to be set apart (sanctified) really quick! We can get focused on God in a hurry when things go wrong. During Operation Desert Storm, for example, America returned to church in droves.

Pray, America, Pray!

But once the war was over, it was business as usual.

Peter once rebelled against the idea that Jesus would suffer (Matthew 16:21-23). Here he is now, in 1 Peter 4:12, telling the Church not to be surprised at the painful trials they're suffering, as though something strange were happening to them.

Something strange? I like that. Suffering should not be strange to a Christian. It is PART of being a Christian.

Peter says, *"...rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you*

may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed...if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear the name. For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God...those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good,"
(1 Peter 4:13-19).

Is Peter implying that the sufferings we experience are divinely sent judgment intended to purify God's people?

Yes! THAT is the Refiner's fire! Purifying and burning up at the same time. Isaiah 54:16 gives us a clue regarding who this is: "Behold, I have created the smith that bloweth the coals in the fire, and that bringeth forth an instrument for his work; and I have created the waster to destroy."

Who IS that blacksmith - this "waster" who destroys? I contend that it is the devil, the enemy of our souls, God's lackey, a flunkey whose schemes continually backfire as he attempts to kill, steal and destroy the dumb, grazing sheep of God.

If you don't agree, consider God's servant Job. Yes, Satan's on God's payroll.

Does God really bring judgment upon His own kids? "*Those He loves, He chastens!*" (Hebrews 12:6).

How could a loving God allow these things to happen? Answer this: How could I swat my child with a wooden spoon when they just won't stay away from the electrical outlet? Even though the saints of God are saved, set apart, we can still be very worldly at times and all the stuff of the world has GOT to be driven from our lives. Darkness has no options when the lights come on. The two can NOT co-exist. Hard as we try. God doesn't turn on the light... WE have to submit to His desire, for our own benefit, to allow that light to shine.

It's called 'obedience.' WE are the ones guilty of hiding our light under a bushel.

For the children of Israel, life as slaves to the Egyptians was hard. For 450 years, they were in bondage, their lives under the complete control of their captors. Still,

as slaves, they were fed, watered, sheltered. They believed in God, acknowledged His existence, gave Him lip service, groaned for His intervention. Yet, they remained in bondage till the appointed time. That's when they were promoted to another level...the Wilderness journey, backside of the desert for the next four decades.

Let's compare their lives of slavery to their Wilderness experience. In the desert, they were completely dependent upon God for everything. He shared His glory with NO ONE. Even their water came from a rock. Their warmth and light during the cold desert nights came from a pillar of fire, the same fire that terrified them on the mountain earlier. Their food was manna and quail sent from Heaven. God wants us to depend upon Him - as loyal subjects would trust any good King, like Solomon, for instance - and He will test us through wilderness experiences where we are forced to rely upon His protection and providence.

Sadly, like the children of Israel, most of us in the West grumble and complain in the midst of these proving times rather than surrendering completely to His control over our lives. While our brothers and sisters living under persecution have suffering down to an art, we don't comprehend it at all.

We have to submit ourselves to God. THEN we can "*resist the devil and he will flee,*" (James 4:7). Are we in bondage as the children of Israel were? Are we slaves to our careers, our busy schedules, our traditions, our habits, our mortgages, our creditors, our religion and even our ministries?

By nature, historically, suffering seems to be the only thing that causes us to submit to God. The One who wants only to bless us is the very One we tend to disobey. No matter how we sing, dance, pray, preach, memorize scripture, teach and prophecy, God knows our hearts. Those around us may be impressed. We may even make ourselves feel better as a result of our outward acts of spirituality. But He allows suffering so we can ACTUALLY get to the next level; so, we can begin to ascend the mountain rather than continually circle it. He even provides the grace to get through the suffering and, don't forget, He never gives us more to handle than we can bear. He knows us better than we know ourselves.

Is Jesus REAL to us? REALLY real? Sure, we can acknowledge His historical existence. Yes, His teachings make more sense to us than those of any other religious leader. We're absolutely sold out on the Christmas and Easter stories and believe the Bible's detailed accounts as 100% FACT.

Right?

But what about the intimacy of that relationship. Not our memorized prayers. Not our bowed heads, raised hands, prostrate bodies, folded hands, bended knees, dancing feet.

INTIMACY!

Are we existing through a moment-to-moment dependence upon Christ? The kind of dependence we have on, say, OXYGEN!

Or, like oxygen, do we take it for granted? Life with an asthmatic gives one a new perspective of THAT analogy!

The Word of God tells us to BELIEVE in the Lord Jesus and we will be saved. Well, the DEVIL believes in God, and he trembles, (James 2:19). Same Greek word for both uses of 'believe'. The word means to entrust, to depend upon a thing as one relies upon air to breathe.

The difference? The devil can't be saved.

Can we be saved? Of course, if we believe according to the proper definition. See, there's a difference between "believing in" (literally "believing INTO) and "acknowledging." The devil has a deeper belief than most "believers," unfortunately. Of course, he learned the hard way. He knows firsthand that, "*It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God,*" (Hebrews 10:31).

Making matters worse, millions have believed they were saved because they responded to the emotional lure of an altar call in a church building somewhere, repeated a prayer, and that was it.

No follow-up.

No discipleship.

No deliverance from old, hindering baggage.

I've seen the altar call "response cards" myself and the same names often appear on successive nights of a crusade.

I've heard newly saved people as they stood in line, waiting to speak with "prayer counselors," making light of their "decision" and walking out of line because they had other things to do. I once worked a crusade where over 3000 high schoolers attended. A female altar worker there told me of a Mormon girl who did not want to be counseled. She simply ordered the altar worker to, "Hurry and say the prayer..." so that she could leave.

No training.

No equipping.

What a mockery!

Jesus taught us that we'd know a tree by its fruits. OK... but is it a baby's fault it grows up with no manners, or the parents who failed to impart the necessity for manners? Is it their own fault that their new Christian lives are so fruitless, or those who've made their salvation so easy?

My belief? Preach the Gospel, tell them to go home and "consider the cost" of salvation. Don't forget to mention that they'll suffer. Jesus said six times that we would be "hated." Don't forget to mention that. Tell them that they may lose their friends and that their enemies would be the members of their own household. You may want to add a little bit about sexual purity, forsaking worldly pleasures and laying down those things that mean most to them... the "other gods" worshipped by modern man, including the god of Churchianity. If they're STILL interested, have them come back in a week for prayer and a year-long discipleship course and absorb them into local Church groups who are prepared to take in these new converts.

You'll "weed 'em out" by that point.

Is that bad?

Isn't this what the world's armies do? Don't we WANT committed, effective warriors in our ranks? If it's good enough for the armed forces of the world, why isn't this good enough for the Army of God?

“But our numbers might be smaller!” Maybe. Maybe not. This generation of young people is just radical enough, they might NEED the Gospel presented like this.

Tell them they could die.

Share with them that many others ARE dying.

Tell them how the Church suffers and how it WILL suffer in the days ahead.

Who knows, such a message might yield a bumper crop!

Hmmm...will the numbers be smaller? If so, Gideon only needed 300. Jesus started with twelve. The road IS narrow, after all. Perhaps it doesn't need to be broad because the traffic is going to be so light. Just a thought.

I worked for a young company that grew from 2,000 clients to 150,000 in the five years that I was employed there. The previous owners was notorious for painting rosie pictures for the new hires, enticing them with the amount of money they would soon be making if they stuck with the vision and helped us with our mission.

One woman I spoke with called me at home one night, after 2 weeks on the job and sheepishly asked me, about the company, “What do we do?”

So much for imparting the vision.

When she resigned several months later, she told me she knew she'd be leaving soon when she began noticing the kinds of cars the Directors and Officers were driving. None too impressive, I assure you.

Except for the owner's.

My thinking is, wouldn't it be best to tell the truth from the get-go? To tell the new applicants that we're looking for Pioneers, NOT Settlers? That anything great that happens will most likely come as a direct result of THEIR efforts? That will

separate the men from the boys, eh?

God is famous for bringing order out of chaos. Making something out of nothing.

The Church needs a clean slate.

Shake that etch-a-sketch!

The way we're functioning now is not working. Statistics PROVE that. The numbers of people reading the Bible, attending church services, who call themselves "born-again", who doubt their own salvation, are staggering. The so-called "revival" that's hit the nation is merely a revival in selected areas that's getting lots of press coverage. It's not really happening yet.

Where's the fruit? Most churches focus so much more on growth than they do discipleship. It's a business. They have to stay afloat because it's their livelihood that's at stake. One must justify one's existence. However, there are no examples in the Scriptures of church organizations struggling to meet payroll or keep the lights on.

No examples of trying to maintain the building and the property, just the people.

The resources back then was put into human resources, not material.

Like the soldiers of the tiny Continental Army in their fight against King George, or the defenders of the Alamo, Christian people will respond EVEN if they are shown that the odds are against them, but that the King of Kings is on their side.

With praying, God-fearing leadership, the Church will become "Mission-Driven" with a Kingdom motivation rather than being the "salvation-driven" institution we know as today.

There is a famous story of how, after the Confederate army pulled back after the furious fighting at Gettysburg, General Robert E. Lee rode among his men, encouraging and edifying his bloodied, beaten troops....not because he wanted them to go back into the battle. He did not! He loved them and was ministering to them, not as soldiers but as human beings. So effective was his speech, so

inspiring, that his defeated army began begging him to let them back into the fighting, which he did not. He loved them too much to see any more of them die.

That love actually inspired his eventual surrender after 4 years of bloody civil war.

The point? People inherently know that they haven't found real life till they've found a cause, or a leader, worth dying for. Jesus was a revolutionary. His cause, eternal. Our enemy is the devil and he has infiltrated our ranks to the point where we're doing many things his way. God will change this. It's HIS Kingdom. Let THIS be the generation He can use to effect this radical change, using millions of already-radical youth, survivors of the holocaust of abortion, this fatherless, X-treme generation, to accomplish the mission their fathers have failed to achieve.

Jesus' Second Coming takes place every time a sanctified Member of the Church allows Him to come on the scene THROUGH them. Sanctification comes as a result of suffering.

Don't defend yourself and don't resist it.

Did Paul defend his suffering? Did he defend the churches he planted? He couldn't. And he wouldn't have if he could have. He knew better. This saint understood suffering.

Am I talking about pacifism? I don't know...am I? In the western U.S., we don't like that word, especially here deep in the heart of Texas. Become a pacifist? Them's fightin' words! When Jesus returns, there will be no more wars to fight. Perhaps that's just the way the Prince of Peace is by nature...or SUPER-nature. Imagine the \$700 BILLION-plus spent annually throughout the world just to build up our arsenals being spent on other stuff like irrigation, Biblical training, cultural pleasures and to alleviate human suffering. A total opposite of what we're doing now.

In this evil world, some crazy leaders are bent on destruction and the subjugation of others. I believe, we must lift the yoke of oppression from those being down-trodden and enslaved by the whims of a mad leader, even if by military force. A strong nation like the U.S. seems to have no choice but to defend weaker nations

from demonically oppressive tyrants.

Our motivation must always be our love for humanity because our God first loved us.

Does the Bible teach pacifism? If your mother or daughter were being attacked by thugs, wouldn't you want someone to lay down their lives and come to her aid?

Indifference would seem to be as bad as the crime.

Though Jehoshaphat won a war by sending people to sing and praise the Lord, the fact remains that his army was on hand anyway.

When Joshua went to Jericho, they never used their weapons. The Lord fought for them. The fact remains, they still brought their swords and spears along.

In many cases, when Israel went to battle, they did not have to fight.

Are you under attack? Your ministry, your business, your health, your family? Some might say, "We're not supposed to lay down and die, are we?" Hmm. Jesus did. In fact, He gave His life freely.

Maybe we're supposed to "Lay down and let ourselves be killed." Our fighting culture says we MUST fight. We have role models... John Wayne... Rambo... Rock 'em, Sock 'em Robots. "Be a man! Be the spiritual leader of your home, brother!" Don't go down without a fight...right?

Peter was the only example of anyone putting up any kind of a fight at all when Jesus was arrested. He cut off the ear of a man named Malchus and Jesus restored his ear within moments. Peter was obviously wrong in what he did. However, his writings in 1 & 2 Peter reflect the final results of his discipleship training under Christ. He learned well, and was crucified just as was His Master, only upside down, for he considered himself unworthy to be crucified exactly as His Savior had been.

Jesus instructed us to turn the other cheek. To love our enemies. Then, He showed us how. Does self-defense fit in with THAT kind of teaching? Not only did He teach it, He lived it!

We should heal when He healed, love as He loved, follow His example. “Well, Jesus was divine,” you say? True but Paul wasn’t. Peter wasn’t. Stephen wasn’t. They were merely men who knew the Truth. The Truth is Jesus Himself. Who followed Jesus? The religious? A few. The strong and influential? Not many. For the most part, it was the whores and the lepers, the poor and the sick. The down-and-outers.

Does that describe you? It's me to a tee.

In the Book of Acts, Peter and John were arrested and ordered not to speak or teach in the Name of Jesus. Their reply? *“Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard,”* (Acts 4:19-20).

So, when the other believers heard of their bold response, did they pray for the threats to be removed?

Did they come against demonic strongholds? NO! They prayed that they, too, might follow Peter and John’s example to also speak their faith with boldness: *“Now, Lord, consider their threats, and enable your servants to speak your Word with great boldness...,”* (Acts 4:29).

If radical Muslim extremists came to burn your church building, should you resist? It’s happening in nations around the world and it’s obvious, the answer appears to be ‘NO!’

And the Gospel is spreading there.

In the Old Testament, God taught the Jews in a physical manner. If they lost a military battle, it was because He withheld His power because of their sin or a lack of faith. Blessings and cursings were according to their behavior. They had very little to go by in terms of eternal life. They had no vision for that. In fact, the words 'eternal' or 'eternity' appear 3 times in the Old Testament, but 45 times in

the New Testament.

Hebrews 11:35-40 shows that weapons formed against them DID prosper, as courageous Jews were tortured and killed while obeying God. As God did with the Jews in the Old Testament, Jesus removed the constant physical protection that the tiny nation of Israel required, as a teaching tool. Not only would He NOT destroy their enemies on their behalf, BUT He would empower them to LOVE them while their enemies were killing them!

By nature, those who suffer without God cause ungodly amounts of suffering. Could it be this war zone they live in has been the very training required of them to reach a war-torn world for Christ? After all, 90% of Christians are saved before age 25.

All over the world, the stage is being set. The players are being moved into strategic position. The “Omega Warriors” are being well-equipped to fight and don’t even know it.

They need a mission worth dying for.

They need leadership.

They need Jesus, the head of The Church and His Body...you and me.

And they need to understand “*the fellowship of His suffering,*” (Philippians 3:10).

They need to know that they can follow a leader who can relate to their suffering.

Are you suffering right now?

Have you suffered throughout your life? Even if your suffering was the result of your own poor choices, do you feel that your sufferings have placed you on the back-burner of Christian society?

Are you feeling like God’s red-headed step-child? You know that your relationship with God is real. Jesus IS a real person in your life.

You know that your quiet Christian existence is laden with miraculous moments perhaps shared only by you and one or two others at any given time.

No fanfare.

No TV interviews.

No magazine covers.

No speaking engagements.

Though no one else is aware, you know that your life consists of a string of conversations between you and the Lord regarding everything from political circumstances to potential weather disasters.

Congratulations! You are one of the multitudes of silent saints who are the devil's worst nightmare. And you may be fighting a personal war that no other Christian knows anything about.

But God knows.

Promotion comes from above, dear Christian. Like King David, as you quietly tend to your corner of the vineyard, prepare to be called upon, for the anointing to come upon you, to be catapulted into a position of great influence that will affect a generation. If only by way of your intercession.

Like King David, your life as a warrior-king will become a series of bloody victories, a loyal army of simpletons, rogues and outcasts at your side.

I was never prepared for "my" Children's Ministry to become the ministry of the Children to the Church. I've learned that there is no Junior Holy Spirit friends. Those kids infiltrated every ministry of our Church, eventually took over the music ministry and were eventually invited by other church groups to come and minister to them. Smartest thing I ever did was to get out of their way and let God have them. It's wonderful to see so many are still serving Him.

The last shall be first. Those who follow your lead will do so for one reason:

they'll know that you have fellowshipped with their suffering.

You know what it's like to be an also-ran.

A reject.

To be expendable.

More importantly, you know your new identity.

That you're a new creation in Christ.

That you are accepted by the One that matters most.

Your confidence in your relationship with God, His grace in your life and your ability to love those who are suffering, will attract them to you. They'll know you are "the real deal."

The Apostle Paul realized that his sufferings were a tool and a symbol of Christ to bring others into the Kingdom. *"For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also, through Christ, our comfort overflows,"* (2 Cor 1:5-6).

Before his execution he said, "I have fought the good fight." His impending doom and past sufferings did not make him a loser and He knew it.

Could it be you were born for such a time as this? Perhaps to lead an army such as this?

Are you, right now, in a place where you represent eternity? Then be God's servant where you live and where you may die.

Give 'em Heaven, saint.

Nothing less.

Here are 5 ways in which God uses suffering in our lives.

1) He uses suffering to DIRECT us. Sometimes He lights a fire to motivate us or get our attention. Read Proverbs 20:30.

2) He uses suffering to INSPECT us. People are like tea bags. Wanna know what's inside? Just drop 'em in hot water! Read James 1:2-3.

3) He uses suffering to CORRECT us. Some lessons are learned only through pain, like a child being burned by a hot stove. Read Psalm 119:71-72.

4) He uses suffering to PROTECT us. Sometimes a problem can be a blessing in disguise, preventing us from being harmed by something more serious.

5) He uses suffering to PERFECT us. God is more interested in character than comfort.

