

## ***The Purpose of Suffering***

*The following letter was written to my elderly Aunt who's husband, Burton, was dying in a rest home. At the same time she was recovering from cancer therapy that had physically incapacitated her and which would dramatically shorten her life.*

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Dear Aunt Hope,

It was good to spend time with you, Uncle Burt and his son Raymond yesterday. It was a meaningful time. Times of great sickness and pain should have special meaning for a Christian. In a deep theological way the word "joy" comes to mind, although in a practical way we don't experience laughter and smiles. But, for the Christian, the concept of "joy" carries connotations of "meaningfulness," and "purpose." It is Christ's suffering and death, not his life and resurrection, that bought our salvation. It is the Crucifixion that is the center of all history, for it was on Calvary that God extended to us eternal life and made sense of the suffering of his people in the centuries before.

The answer to the question, "How can a loving and all powerful God allow so much pain and suffering?" is the central question of all existence, because, in its answer we come to Jesus Christ and discover the meaning, purpose, and deep-seated joy that his passion, suffering and death, has for all mankind.

Thus it is that Christians should look upon suffering as a special and meaningful time, filled with great purpose.

### **I Hate God**

A young woman came to Bishop Fulton Sheen one time in a rage and in hatred toward God, because she believed that God had allowed her only daughter to die. "Why," she demanded of the bishop, "did God allow such a terrible thing to happen to *me*?". Sheen replied, "I'll tell you why your daughter died. It was so that you would be here today and hear about God's love." Moments later, The woman broke down and began her eventual road to God, salvation and a personal knowledge of Jesus Christ. Her daughter died so that she might be saved.

### **Murder Begets Redemption**

When the murderous Acua Indians killed Jim Elliot and his four companions, there was outrage among many that did not understand the ways of God. But, there in the jungle

of Ecuador (not unlike the wilderness of Christ's passion), God understood as others later did, that the only way to get to the hearts of the Acua was through an act that they had perfected to a science—murder. The Acua practiced murder, vengeance, and retribution like Arnold Palmer practiced golf. How does a missionary get through to a tribe of jungle natives like that. God knew. It was to allow the Acua to kill true Christians who did not practice retaliation with vengeance. Instead, these Christians led in part by Jim's wife Elisabeth, practiced *sacrificial* love. Thus, it was that the missionaries murderous deaths were offered up by their wives and by Christ as a ransom, and as a redemption for the salvation of a whole nation. Although Elisabeth Elliot continues to claim that she doesn't know why her husband had to die that day, the title of her best selling book about the murders, indicates that she knows all too well the importance of Christian suffering. The book's title is *Through Gates of Splendor*.

### Suffering in Scripture

When Christians are open to the suffering that God allows them to experience, He can bring about great redemption in their lives and the lives around them. Here are verses in the Bible that point to this truth. The translation is the New Revised Standard. The essence or premise of these verses is: *Suffering* for the Christian, *always* brings with it a greater *redemption*. The corollary of this axiom is: There can be no redemption without suffering. Ultimately that suffering is Christ's, but because we are his children and heirs, he allows us to suffer with him.

*When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.*

—Romans 8:15b-17

*We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope [the lack of pain which is not seen] we were saved.*

—Romans 8:22-24

*We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.*

—2 Corinthians 4:8-10

*For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you... Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.*

—2Corinthians 4:11, 15

*So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure.*

—2 Corinthians 4:16-17

*For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well.*

—Philippians 1:29

*I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church...It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone that teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ."*

—Colossians 1:24, 28

*My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking on nothing.*

—James 1:2-4

*So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.*

—2 Corinthians 12:9-10

### **The Enigma of Leon Porter**

February 21, 2000, on the Northwest Flight to Orlando, the bulkhead aisle seat I am normally able to reserve for myself was unavailable and I was given the center seat next to it. It was cramped and uncomfortable. But the flight was to be anything but unfortunate. For, a few minutes later a wheel chair came down the aisle to deposit in the seat next to me a large, muscular, clean cut black man. He was paralyzed from the waist down and he had to be lifted into the seat next to me. He had been shot in Pontiac, MI during a drug related fight between warring gangs. At that time, ten years earlier, he had been on the fringe of the drug trade. After the shooting, he spent six years of excruciating painful rehabilitation.

Today, Elder Leon Porter is the full time youth minister at New Mount Moriah Missionary Baptist Church in Pontiac. That day with me on the plane, he was traveling with several other ministers to a conference in Florida. As we got to know each other, I made a comment to him about how terrible and awful it must have been to be shot and go through the many years of pain associated with his disability. He looked at me and said, "You don't get it. Being shot was the best thing that ever happened to me. It caused me

to turn to God. I became a Christian. God is my savior. And my continued disability is a tangible reminder to the kids I minister to every day, of the pain and destruction of sin. I'm a rolling object lesson. The suffering I've been through continues to be part of Christ's redemption for many young people." Leon is completing in the flesh what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of the other young people he daily meets.

### **The Suffering of Michael Zahodne**

My friend, Mike Zahodne, died at age 41 from childhood diagnosed diabetes. Since the age of 7 he learned to stick a needle into his fingers every few hours to test his blood. He married Joanne and together they had two children: John and Katie. During high school they saw their father continuously in and out of hospitals. The last few years, every few months, the doctors would cut off another part of Mike's body where gangrene threatened his life. By the time I met Mike, both legs and one arm were gone. On his right hand, all he had left was a thumb and index finger. Even though he had no calves, ankles, feet or toes, his nerves continued to tell him that they were still there and were in the process of being cut off. The pain never ceased. Dialysis made him so sick between sessions that he could not hold food down, and for the past year he had refused it. He had a kidney transplant from his mother (both of his had failed) but now his mother's kidney was only operating at 15%. Slowly, over the months that I knew Mike, his body swelled up from the gathering toxins that would eventually kill him. He threw-up the hospital food they brought him. Once while we were talking, his dinner came up and I cleaned up the mess.

For the eight months before he died I often brought him communion from church. He was a life-long Catholic and understood the significance of The Eucharist (what Catholics sacramentally believe and the Apostles taught is the real body of Jesus Christ (John 6). The Eucharist, of course, is the "celebration" of Christ's suffering and death. It's a celebration because in Christ's suffering and death we have eternal life and forgiveness.

I asked Mike one day as I was interviewing him for his biography, if he was bitter or angry at God for the lifetime of pain and suffering he had sustained. He said something like this to me: "Stan, I have family and friends like you that love me and visit me and do all manner of nice things for me. My Lord, when he was suffering and dying, had nobody. They all left him, even Peter denied the Lord's friendship. How can I complain? My Lord, suffered far more than I did. If my suffering can bring others to God and reconcile the relationship between my mom and wife, then it is all worth it.

Suffice it to say, Mike's suffering had deep and eternal redemptive purpose. A videotape was made of his testimony several months before his death that was used in a Christian retreat for youth. A teleplay for television was written about his life, death and Christian witness, and may one day be produced and seen by millions. His two children are models of purity, discipline and character. His son John, is now a Freshman at the United States Naval Academy. Those that know John say he will someday be either the President or the Pope. Such is the product of Christian pain and suffering.

I could go on and on, about the blessings we experienced and those that rededicated their lives to God through Pam's cancer.

Of course, not all the pain and suffering that Christians suffer has a redemptive outcome. Why? Because Christians don't see the pain and suffering as a gift. They see it as a burden that comes only from Satan. So, God accommodates. As he always does, he answers our prayers.

### **The Death of Kevin Zambo**

But there are some, like Marty Zambo that understand differently the purpose of grave pain and even death of Christians. Marty's son was Kevin an honors graduate of Fairlane Christian High School where his dad was the school janitor. Kevin was an outstanding Christian young man gifted with athletic ability and academic smarts. My wife, Pam, who taught at the school, encouraged Kevin and helped a little in his application to the United States Naval Academy where he was accepted. Occasionally, on our visits to see our son Josh at the Academy, we'd see Kevin, smartly dressed in his uniform. Despite the hazing that plebe's receive, Kevin always wore a broad smile. His Christian faith was strong and real. Yet tragedy would soon strike.

Just before returning to the USNA as an Academy "Youngster" (Sophomore), Kevin attended a church youth social near his home in suburban Detroit. Near midnight, he was riding his motorcycle home when a truck ran a red light, hit Kevin's bike and sent Kevin's body sprawling across the intersection. Minutes later, Kevin was pronounced dead at the scene.

Several days later Josh flew in from Annapolis and we all went to the funeral home to pay our respects. The Navy was there with full honors and Kevin lay in his casket, a folded United States flag tucked between his body and the coffin. The greeting room was large and packed with people of all ages and walks of life. At the head of the reception line was Marty Zambo greeting visitors who seemed to be in the hundreds, an uncommonly large number for such a gathering. As Pam and I eased our way into the line and as the line crept slowly forward, we began to understand the attraction to this seemingly cursed family who had lost their only proud son to a reckless driver.

When I came to Marty, whom I had only met once or twice before, Marty looked at me, his eyes clear, his face bright and smiling and gripped my hand with the firmness and assurance of a winning politician. Before I could say a word of condolence or how sorry I was about Kevin's untimely death, Marty embraced me, as he had everyone before, and prayed for me and blessed me, and asked God to shower me with blessings. He prayed and prayed and prayed for me, as he did everyone else. I do not think I was ever able to say my little rehearsed and now insignificant speech about how sorry I was, or how terrible the accident was, or how unfortunate the family was. You see, Marty had fully understood on Kevin's behalf Paul's encouragement to Timothy:

*As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I*

*have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.*

— 2Timothy 4:6-8

Marty had succeed in raising Kevin and ushering him into heaven (our eternal hope of glory). But, at that very hour, there in a dingy funeral on the outskirts of Detroit, the light of Christ was illuminating hundreds of people through Marty's joy in Christ. I don't really know, but my study of the faces and voices on that afternoon indicated that many, many people, because of Kevin's death and Marty's ministry of reconciliation, rededicated their souls to God. Just as Christ died, so we are asked to take up His cross and die, for we are Christ's body, his church.

Paul understood that while we physically may suffer, so our spirits would be filled with the antithesis of suffering—consolation. In classic Christian literature you'll read about the consolation of the saints while facing death or the consolation experienced by cloistered nuns and monks whose lives of contemplation are given over to full time prayer for the world. In this sense *consolation* means a great comfort and peace, the assurance of goodness, or the deep sense of rightness and deep seated joy.

*For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ. If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we are also suffering.*

—2 Corinthians 1:5-7

### **We Always Know Why**

In times of suffering, ministers and others will offer words of consolation like, "We don't know why these things happen. All we can do is trust God."

These are unfortunate words because the reasons for suffering are clear to both ministers and people close to the victims of suffering, if not the victims themselves.

1. Christian ministers know that suffering, in general, is punishment for original sin. We physically die because God placed a curse on Adam that we inherited. "You shall surely die..." God said, and suffering is part of that death. This is the underlying basis for the next two reasons. What people often mean when they say, "We don't know why so-and-so suffered or died" is that we think God's plan for our life is so mysterious that we can never know it. And while this is true on a micro level, it is false on a macro level. From the days of ancient Israel to modern Christianity, we suffering and die because we are under Adam's curse. Why suffering attacks us at one point in time or another is perhaps answered by the next two reasons. But, ultimately, we suffer because Adam sinned. It's that simple. It's that clear.

2. Ministers also know that we suffer because we are connected in some way to specific violations of the *spiritual* laws of the universe. When we or someone close to us breaks their spiritual relationship with God and sins, some level of emotional or physical trauma always results. The violation may be conscious and premeditated, or unconscious and subliminal, but the violation always has a consequence. For instance, adultery never affects *just* the offending parties, but also destroys the trust and loyalty with others. Likewise stealing and lying affect self confidence as guilt constructs obstacles to normal mental processes. Even for the non-Christian all of this is true, for the effects of breaking spiritual laws are substantiated by modern psychology although, at times, different terms are used.
3. Lastly, and this is typically known to those close to the suffering victim if not the victim himself, suffering can be the result of a violation of the *physical* laws of the universe. Sometimes the violation is conscious and premeditated. Other times a law has been broken unawares. But the violation, nonetheless occurs. Such violations occur when we eat spoiled food, fall down the stairs, are exposed to a carcinogen, or unknowingly strain a muscle. Sometimes the suffering is immediate, other times it takes days or decades to appear. Marty Zambo died because he was careless and the drunk driver was reckless. Mike Zahodne died because of an incurable disease and because he rarely followed the regimen of diet and exercise prescribed for diabetics. Leon Porter got shot because he was associating with gangs that shoot people. In each of these cases, and most others, the reason for the suffering can be clearly identified by the honest and inquisitive person.

But, all of this suffering can be redeemed if we offer it up to Christ for the salvation of ourselves and others. Just as Christ offered up his body for the salvation of the world, we are Christ's body and we are asked to complete in our flesh the sufferings of Christ on behalf of individuals and the church. For, it is through physical suffering that we proclaim that we are not of this world but of the next. It is through joyful suffering that we give testimony to the world that our bodies are only temporary, and that the storehouse of riches that we have piled up are spiritual, eternal, and of dimensions beyond those of this universe.

Your devoted nephew,

Stan