

## CHAPTER 4

# Why God Appoints Suffering for His Servants

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Why did God appoint for Paul to suffer so much as the prototype of the frontier missionary? He is sovereign. As every child knows he could toss Satan into the pit today if he wanted to and all his terrorizing of the church would be over. But God wills that the mission of the church advance through storm and suffering. What are the reasons? I will mention six.

## 1. Suffering Deepens Faith and Holiness

Hebrews 12 tells us that God disciplines his children through suffering. His aim is deeper faith and deeper holiness. “He disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness” (Heb. 12:10). Jesus experienced the same thing. “Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered” (Heb. 5:8). This does not mean that Jesus grew from disobedience to obedience; the same writer says he never sinned (Heb. 4:15). It means that the process through which he demonstrated deeper and deeper obedience was the process of suffering. For us there is not only the need to have our obedience tested and proven deep, but also purified of all remnants of self-reliance and entanglement with the world.

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Paul described this experience in his own life like this:

For we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But *that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.* (2 Cor. 1:8-9)

Paul does not concede his suffering to the hand of Satan but says that God ordained it for the increase of his faith. God knocked the props of life out from under Paul's heart so that he would have no choice but to fall on God and get his hope from the promise of the resurrection. This is the first purpose of missionary suffering: to wean us from the world and set our hope fully in God alone (cf. Rom 5:3-4). Since the freedom to love flows from this kind of radical hope (Col. 1:4-5), suffering is a primary means of building compassion into the lives of God's servants.

Thousands of missionaries through the centuries have found that the sufferings of life have been the school of Christ where lessons of faith were taught that could not be learned anywhere else. For example, John G. Paton, who was born in 1824 in Scotland, was a missionary to the New Hebrides (today's Vanuatu) in the South Seas from 1858 almost until his death in 1907. He lost his wife four months after he landed on the island of Tanna at the age of thirty-four. Two weeks later his newborn son died. He buried them alone with his own hands. "But for Jesus, and the fellowship he vouchsafed to me there, I must have gone mad and died beside the lonely grave!"<sup>1</sup> He stayed on the island for a harrowing four years of dangers. Finally there was an uprising mounted against him, and he believed it was right to try to escape. He sought help from the one person he could trust on the island, his friend Nowar. His escape was an unforgettable discovery of grace that left a lifelong spiritual mark. To escape, Nowar told Paton he could not stay in the village; instead, he should hide in a tree, which his son would show him, and there stay till the moon rises.

<sup>1</sup> James Paton, ed., *John G. Paton: Missionary to the New Hebrides, an Autobiography* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965 [original publication, 1889, 1898]), 80.

Being entirely at the mercy of such doubtful and vacillating friends, I, though perplexed, felt it best to obey. I climbed into the tree and was left there alone in the bush. The hours I spent there live all before me as if it were but of yesterday. I heard the frequent discharging of muskets, and the yells of the Savages. Yet I sat there among the branches, as safe in the arms of Jesus. Never, in all my sorrows, did my Lord draw nearer to me, and speak more soothingly in my soul, than when the moonlight flickered among these chestnut leaves, and the night air played on my throbbing brow, as I told all my heart to Jesus. Alone, yet not alone! If it be to glorify my God, I will not grudge to spend many nights alone in such a tree, to feel again my Savior's spiritual presence, to enjoy His consoling fellowship. If thus thrown back upon your own soul, alone, all alone, in the midnight, in the bush, in the very embrace of death itself, have you a Friend that will not fail you then?<sup>2</sup>

## **2. Suffering Makes Your Cup Increase**

By enduring suffering with patience, the reward of our experience of God's glory in heaven increases. This is part of Paul's meaning in 2 Corinthians 4:17-18.

For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

Paul's affliction is "preparing" or "effecting" or "bringing about" a weight of glory beyond all comparison. We must take seriously Paul's words here. He is not merely saying that he has a great hope in heaven that enables him to endure suffering. That is true. But here he says that the suffering has an effect on the weight of glory. There seems to be a connection between the suffering endured and the degree of glory enjoyed. Of course the glory outstrips the suffering infinitely, as Paul says in Romans 8:18, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are *not worth comparing with the glory* that is to be revealed to us." Nevertheless the weight of that glory, or the experience of that glory,

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 200. For a brief overview of Paton's life and ministry, see John Piper, "'You Will Be Eaten By Cannibals!' Courage in the Cause of World Missions: Lessons from the Life of John G. Paton" at [www.desiringGod.org](http://www.desiringGod.org).

seems to be more or less, depending in part on the affliction we have endured with patient faith.

Jesus pointed in the same direction when he said, “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for *your reward is great in heaven*” (Matt. 5:11-12). This would carry the greatest encouragement to rejoice if Jesus meant that the more we endure suffering in faith, the greater will be our reward. If a Christian who suffers much for Jesus and one who does not suffer much experience God’s final glory in exactly the same way and degree, it would seem strange to tell the suffering Christian to rejoice and be glad (in that very day, cf. Luke 6:23) because of the reward he would receive even if he did not suffer. The reward promised seems to be in response to the suffering and a specific recompense for it. If this is not explicit and certain here, it does seem to be implied in other passages of the New Testament. I will let Jonathan Edwards bring them out as we listen to one of the most profound reflections on this problem I have ever read. Here Edwards deals, in a breathtaking way, with the issue of how there can be degrees of happiness in a world of perfect joy.

There are different degrees of happiness and glory in heaven. . . . The glory of the saints above will be in some proportion to their eminency in holiness and good works here [and patience through suffering is one of the foremost good works, cf. Rom. 2:7]. Christ will reward all according to their works. He that gained ten pounds was made ruler over ten cities, and he that gained five pounds over five cities (Luke 19:17-19). “He that soweth sparingly, shall reap sparingly; and he that soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully” (2 Corinthians 9:6). And the apostle Paul tells us that, as one star differs from another star in glory, so also it shall be in the resurrection of the dead (1 Corinthians 15:41). Christ tells us that he who gives a cup of cold water unto a disciple in the name of a disciple, shall in no wise lose his reward. But this could not be true, if a person should have no greater reward for doing many good works than if he did but few.

It will be no damp to the happiness of those who have lower degrees of happiness and glory, that there are others advanced in glory above them: for all shall be perfectly happy, every one shall be perfectly satisfied. Every vessel that is cast into this ocean of happiness is full, though there are some vessels far larger than others; and there shall be

no such thing as envy in heaven, but perfect love shall reign through the whole society. Those who are not so high in glory as others, will not envy those that are higher, but they will have so great, and strong, and pure love to them, that they will rejoice in their superior happiness; their love to them will be such that they will rejoice that they are happier than themselves; so that instead of having a damp to their own happiness, it will add to it. . . .

And so, on the other hand, those that are highest in glory, as they will be the most lovely, so they will proportionally excel in divine benevolence and love to others, and will have more love to God and to the saints than those that are lower in holiness and happiness. And besides, those that will excel in glory will also excel in humility. Here in this world, those that are above others are the objects of envy, because . . . others conceive of them as being lifted up with it; but in heaven it will not be so, but those saints in heaven who excel in happiness will also [excel] in holiness, and consequently in humility. . . . The exaltation of some in heaven above the rest will be so far from diminishing the perfect happiness and joy of the rest who are inferior, that they will be the happier for it; such will be the union in their society that they will be partakers of each other's happiness. Then will be fulfilled in its perfections that which is declared in 1 Corinthians 12:22, "If one of the members be honored all the members rejoice with it."<sup>3</sup>

Thus one of the aims of God in the suffering of the saints is to enlarge their capacity to enjoy his glory both here and in the age to come. When their cup is picked up as it were from the "scum of the world" (1 Cor. 4:13), and tossed into the ocean of heaven's happiness, it will hold more happiness for having been long weaned off the world and made to live on God alone.

<sup>3</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), 2:902. The parable of the workers in the vineyard who all made the same wage (Matt. 20:1-16) need not be in conflict with what Edwards (and the texts he cites!) teaches here. What that text may imply is that all of us are thrown into the same ocean of happiness. Another point of that parable is that God is free to give anyone any degree of blessing more than he deserves, and if there is anyone who is self-pitying in or proud about his endurance, God is indeed free to exalt a person even above him so as to humble him and make him realize all of heaven is all of grace. I think Jonathan Edwards effectively answers Craig Blomberg's question: "Is it not fundamentally self-contradictory to speak of degrees of perfection?" "Degrees of Reward in the Kingdom of Heaven," in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35 (June 1992): 162-63. I do, however, want to side with Blomberg over against those who speak of "earning" rewards and who distort the conditional promises of heaven into promises of levels of reward in heaven.

### 3. Suffering Is the Price of Making Others Bold

God uses the suffering of his missionaries to awaken others out of their slumbers of indifference and make them bold. When Paul was imprisoned in Rome he wrote of this to the church at Philippi. “Most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear” (Phil. 1:14). If he must, God will use the suffering of his devoted emissaries to make a sleeping church wake up and take risks for God.

The sufferings and dedication of young David Brainerd has had this effect on thousands. Henry Martyn recorded Brainerd’s impact on his life again and again in his *Journal*.

September 11, 1805: What a quickening example has he often been to me, especially on this account, that he was of a weak and sickly constitution!

May 8, 1806: Blessed be the memory of that holy man! I feel happy that I shall have his book with me in India, and thus enjoy, in a manner, the benefit of his company and example.

May 12, 1806: My soul was revived today through God’s never-ceasing compassion, so that I found the refreshing presence of God in secret duties; especially was I most abundantly encouraged by reading D. Brainerd’s account of the difficulties attending a mission to the heathen. Oh, blessed be the memory of that beloved saint! No uninspired writer ever did me so much good. I felt most sweetly joyful to labor amongst the poor natives here; and my willingness was, I think, more divested of those romantic notions, which have sometimes inflated me with false spirits.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Five Inspiring Wives*

In our own time it is hard to overstate the impact that the martyrdom of Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, Ed McCully, Pete Fleming, and Roger Youderian has had on generations of students.<sup>5</sup> The word that appeared

<sup>4</sup> *Journal and Letters of Henry Martyn*, 240, 326-28.

<sup>5</sup> For their remarkable story, see the following resources: Elisabeth Elliot, *Through Gates of Splendor*, 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1986); Elisabeth Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty: The Life and Testament of Jim Elliot* (San Francisco, Calif.: Harper San Francisco, 1989); Elisabeth Elliot, *The Savage My Kinsmen*, 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Servant Publications, 1996); Steve Saint, “Did They Have to Die?” *Christianity Today* 40, no. 10 (September 16, 1996): 20-27; Russell T. Hitt, *Jungle Pilot: The Gripping Story of the Life and Witness of Nate Saint, Martyred Missionary to Ecuador* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Discovery House, 1997).

again and again in the testimonies of those who heard the Huaorani<sup>6</sup> story was “dedication.” But more than is often realized it was the strength of the wives of these men that made many of us feel a surge of desire to be dedicated.

Barbara Youderian, the wife of Roger, wrote in her diary that night in January 1956:

Tonight the Captain told us of his finding four bodies in the river. One had tee-shirt and blue-jeans. Roj was the only one who wore them. . . . God gave me this verse two days ago, Psalm 48:14, “For this God is our God for ever and ever; He will be our Guide even unto death.” As I came face to face with the news of Roj’s death, my heart was filled with praise. He was worthy of his homegoing. Help me, Lord, to be both mummy and daddy.<sup>7</sup>

It is not hard to feel the biblical point Paul was making. The suffering of the servants of God, borne with faith and even praise, is a shattering experience to apathetic saints whose lives are empty in the midst of countless comforts.

#### *Applications Doubled at His Death*

The execution of Wycliffe missionary Chet Bitterman by the Colombian guerrilla group M-19 on March 6, 1981, unleashed an amazing zeal for the cause of Christ. Chet had been in captivity for seven weeks while his wife, Brenda, and little daughters Anna and Esther waited in Bogotá. The demand of M-19 was that Wycliffe get out of Colombia.

They shot him just before dawn—a single bullet to the chest. Police found his body in the bus where he died, in a parking lot in the south of town. He was clean and shaven, his face relaxed. A guerrilla banner wrapped his remains. There were no signs of torture.

In the year following Chet’s death “applications for overseas service with Wycliffe Bible Translators doubled. This trend was continued.”<sup>8</sup> It is not the kind of missionary mobilization that any of us would choose. But it

<sup>6</sup>This is the name of the tribe formerly called Auca, which means “savage.”

<sup>7</sup>Quoted in Elisabeth Elliot, *Through Gates of Splendor* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 235-36.

<sup>8</sup>Steve Estes, *Called to Die* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1986), 252.

is God's way. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24).

#### 4. Suffering Fills Up What Is Lacking in Christ's Afflictions

The suffering of Christ's messengers ministers to those they are trying to reach and may open them to the gospel. This was one of the ways Paul brought the gospel to bear on the people in Thessalonica. "You know what kind of men we proved to be among you *for your sake*. And *you became imitators of us* and of the Lord, for *you received the word in much affliction*, with the joy of the Holy Spirit" (1 Thess. 1:5-6). They had imitated Paul by enduring much affliction with joy, the sort of endurance that Paul had evidenced among them. So it was his suffering that moved them and drew them to his authentic love and truth.

This is the kind of ministry Paul had in mind when he said, "As we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation" (2 Cor. 1:5-6). His sufferings were the means God used to bring salvation to the Corinthian church. The Corinthians could see the suffering love of Christ in Paul. He was actually sharing in Christ's sufferings and making them real for the church.

This is part of what Paul meant in that amazing statement in Colossians 1:24, "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am *filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body*, that is, the church." Christ's afflictions are not lacking in their atoning sufficiency. They are lacking in that they are not known and felt by people who were not at the cross. Paul dedicated himself not only to carry the message of those sufferings to the nations, but also to suffer with Christ and for Christ in such a way that what the people saw were "Christ's sufferings." In this way he followed the pattern of Christ by laying down his life for the life of the church. "I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory" (2 Tim. 2:10).

#### *"When We Saw Your Blistered Feet"*

While I was working on the first edition of *Let the Nations Be Glad!* in 1992, I had an opportunity to hear J. Oswald Sanders speak. His mes-

sage touched deeply on suffering. He was eighty-nine years old at the time and still traveled and spoke around the world. He had written a book a year since he turned seventy! I mention that only to exult in the utter dedication of a life poured out for the gospel without thought of coasting in self-indulgence from age sixty-five to the grave.<sup>9</sup>

He told the story of an indigenous missionary who walked barefoot from village to village preaching the gospel in India. After a long day of many miles and much discouragement he came to a certain village and tried to speak the gospel but was spurned. So he went to the edge of the village dejected and lay down under a tree and slept from exhaustion.

When he awoke the whole town was gathered to hear him. The head man of the village explained that they came to look him over while he was sleeping. When they saw his blistered feet they concluded that he must be a holy man, and that they had been evil to reject him. They were sorry and wanted to hear the message that he was willing to suffer so much to bring them.

#### *At the Third Beating the Women Wept*

One of the unlikeliest men to attend the Itinerant Evangelists' Conference in Amsterdam sponsored by the Billy Graham Association was a Masai Warrior named Joseph. But his story won him a hearing with Dr. Graham himself. The story is told by Michael Card.

One day Joseph, who was walking along one of these hot, dirty African roads, met someone who shared the gospel of Jesus Christ with him. Then and there he accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior. The power of the Spirit began transforming his life; he was filled with such excitement and joy that the first thing he wanted to do was return to his own village and share that same Good News with the members of his local tribe.

Joseph began going from door-to-door, telling everyone he met about the Cross of Jesus and the salvation it offered, expecting to see their faces light up the way his had. To his amazement the villagers not only didn't care, they became violent. The men of the village seized him and held him to the ground while the women beat him with strands of

<sup>9</sup>For an organization devoted to helping people nearing retirement give their energy and skill and heart to the cause of Christ, see the Finishers Project (<http://www.finishers.org/>). Part of their vision statement says, "We can either give them to Jesus to lay up as treasure in Heaven or lose them."

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barbed wire. He was dragged from the village and left to die alone in the bush.

Joseph somehow managed to crawl to a waterhole, and there, after days of passing in and out of consciousness, found the strength to get up. He wondered about the hostile reception he had received from people he had known all his life. He decided he must have left something out or told the story of Jesus incorrectly. After rehearsing the message he had first heard, he decided to go back and share his faith once more.

Joseph limped into the circle of huts and began to proclaim Jesus. “He died for you, so that you might find forgiveness and come to know the living God,” he pleaded. Again he was grabbed by the men of the village and held while the women beat him reopening wounds that had just begun to heal. Once more they dragged him unconscious from the village and left him to die.

To have survived the first beating was truly remarkable. To live through the second was a miracle. Again, days later, Joseph awoke in the wilderness, bruised, scarred—and determined to go back.

He returned to the small village and this time, they attacked him before he had a chance to open his mouth. As they flogged him for the third and probably the last time, he again spoke to them of Jesus Christ, the Lord. Before he passed out, the last thing he saw was that the women who were beating him began to weep.

This time he awoke in his own bed. The ones who had so severely beaten him were now trying to save his life and nurse him back to health. The entire village had come to Christ.<sup>10</sup>

Surely this is something of what Paul meant when he said, “I fill up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body” (Col. 1:24).

### 5. Suffering Enforces the Missionary Command to Go

The suffering of the church is used by God to reposition the missionary troops in places they might not have otherwise gone. This is clearly the effect that Luke wants us to see in the story of the martyrdom of Stephen and the persecution that came after it. God spurs the church into missionary service by the suffering she endures. Therefore we must not judge too quickly the apparent setbacks and tactical defeats of the church. If you see things with the eyes of God, the Master

<sup>10</sup>Michael Card, “Wounded in the House of Friends,” *Virtue* (March/April 1991): 28-29, 69.

Strategist, what you see in every setback is the positioning of troops for a greater advance and a greater display of his wisdom and power and love.

Acts 8:1 charts the divine strategy for the persecution: “There arose on that day [the day of Stephen’s murder] a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of *Judea and Samaria*, except the apostles.” Up until now no one had moved out to Judea and Samaria in spite of what Jesus had said in Acts 1:8: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria. . . .” It is no accident that these are the very two regions to which the persecution sends the church. What obedience will not achieve, persecution will.

To confirm this divine missionary purpose of the persecution, Luke refers to it in Acts 11:19: “Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews.” But in Antioch some spoke to Greeks also. In other words, the persecution not only sent the church to Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1) but also beyond to the nations (Acts 11:19).

### *The Inertia of Ease, the Apathy of Abundance*

The lesson here is not just that God is sovereign and turns setbacks into triumphs. The lesson is that comfort and ease and affluence and prosperity and safety and freedom often cause a tremendous inertia in the church. The very things that we think would produce personnel and energy and creative investment of time and money for the missionary cause instead produce the exact opposite: weakness, apathy, lethargy, self-centeredness, and preoccupation with security.

Studies have shown that the richer we are, the smaller the percentage of our income we give to the church and its mission. The poorest fifth of the church give 3.4 percent of their income to the church and the richest fifth give 1.6 percent—half as much as the poorer church members.<sup>11</sup> It is a strange principle, one that probably goes right to the heart

<sup>11</sup> The *Minneapolis Star Tribune* carried an article on Friday, May 3, 1991, from which these data are taken.

of our sinfulness and Christ's sufficiency, that hard times, like persecution, often produce more personnel, more prayer, more power, more open purses than easy times.

It is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven, Jesus said (Matt. 19:23). It is also hard for rich people to help others enter. Jesus said as much in the parable of the soils. "The cares of the world, and *the delight in riches*, and *the desire for other things* enter in and choke the word and it proves unfruitful" (Mark 4:19, AT)—unfruitful for missions and most every other good work.

Persecution can have harmful effects on the church, but prosperity seems even more devastating to the mission God calls us to. My point here is not that we should seek persecution. That would be presumption—like jumping off the temple. The point is that we should be very wary of prosperity and excessive ease and comfort and affluence. And we should not be disheartened but filled with hope if we are persecuted for righteousness' sake, because the point of Acts 8:1 is that God makes persecution serve the mission of the church.

We must not be glib about this. The price of missionary advance is immense. Stephen paid for it with his life. And Stephen was one of the brightest stars in the Jerusalem sky. His enemies "could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke" (Acts 6:10, AT). Surely he was more valuable alive than dead, we would all reason. He was needed! There was no one like Stephen! But God saw it another way.

#### *How Joseph Stalin Served the Cause*

The way God brought whole Uzbek villages to Christ in the twentieth century is a great illustration of God's strange use of upheaval and displacement. Bill and Amy Stearns tell the story in their hope-filled book, *Catch the Vision 2000*.<sup>12</sup> The key player was Joseph Stalin.

Thousands of Koreans fled what is now North Korea in the 1930s as the Japanese invaded. Many of these settled around Vladivostok. When Stalin in the late '30s and early '40s began developing Vladivostok as a weapons manufacturing center, he deemed the Koreans a security risk. So he relocated them in five areas around the

<sup>12</sup> Bill and Amy Stearns, *Catch the Vision 2000* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1991), 12-13.

Soviet Union. One of those areas was Tashkent, hub of the staunchly Muslim people called the Uzbeks. Twenty million strong, the Uzbeks had for hundreds of years violently resisted any Western efforts to introduce Christianity.

As the Koreans settled around Tashkent, the Uzbeks welcomed their industry and kindness. Within a few decades, the Koreans were included in nearly every facet of Uzbek cultural life.

As usual in God's orchestration of global events, he had planted within the relocated Koreans strong pockets of believers. Little did Stalin suspect that these Koreans would not only begin enjoying a wild-fire revival among their own people, they would also begin bringing their Muslim, Uzbek, and Kazak friends to Christ.

The first public sign of the Korean revival and its breakthrough effects on the Uzbeks and Kazaks came on June 2, 1990, when in the first open-air Christian meeting in the history of Soviet Central Asia, a young Korean from America preached to a swelling crowd in the streets of Alma-Ata, capital of Kazakhstan.

The result of these roundabout, decades-long maneuverings by God to position his people in inaccessible places is that Muslims, who would not receive missionaries, are confessing that *Isa* (Jesus) is the way the truth and the life. This was a costly strategy for many believers. To be uprooted from their homeland in Korea, and then again from their new home near Vladivostok, must have been a severe test of the Koreans' faith that God is good and has a loving plan for their lives. The truth was that God did have a loving plan, and not only for their lives but also for many unreached Muslims among the Uzbek and Kazak peoples.

#### *Going Forward by Getting Arrested*

God's strange ways of guiding the missionary enterprise are seen similarly in the way Jesus told the disciples to expect arrest and imprisonment as God's deployment tactic to put them with people they would never otherwise reach. "They will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. *This will be a time for you to bear testimony*" (Luke 21:12-13, AT; cf. Mark 13:9).

The June/July 1989 issue of *Mission Frontiers* carried an article signed with the pseudonym, Frank Marshall. He was a missionary in a

politically sensitive Latin American country.<sup>13</sup> He told the story of his recent imprisonment. He and his coworkers had been beaten numerous times and thrown in jail before. This time federal agents accused him of fraud and bribing because they assumed he could not have gotten his official documents without lying. They did not believe that he had been born in the country.

In prison the Lord spared him from sexual assault from a huge man wrapped in a towel with four gold chains around his neck and a ring on every finger. When put in the cell with this man, Frank began sharing the gospel with him and praying in his heart, "Lord, deliver me from this evil." The man changed color, shouted at Frank to shut up, and told him to leave him alone.

Frank began to tell others about Christ when the men had free time in the courtyard. One Muslim named Satawa confessed Christ within the first week and invited Frank to answer questions with a group of fifteen other Muslims. In two weeks Frank finally was able to get a lawyer. He also asked for a box of Bibles. The next Sunday forty-five men gathered in the courtyard to hear Frank preach. He spoke about how hard it was for him to be away from his family, and spoke of how much God loved his Son and yet gave him up for sinners so that we could believe and live. Thirty of these men stayed afterwards to pray and ask the Lord to lead them and forgive them. Frank was soon released and deported to the United States. But he now knows firsthand the meaning of Jesus' words, "This will be a time for testimony."

#### *Miracles in Mozambique*

During the 1960s the Lord raised up an indigenous leader in the church in Mozambique named Martinho Campos. The story of his ministry, *Life Out of Death in Mozambique*, is a remarkable testimony to God's strange ways of missionary blessing.

Martinho was leading a series of meetings in the administrative area of Gurue sixty miles from his own area of Nauela. The police arrested him and put him in jail without a trial. The police chief, a European, assumed that the gatherings were related to the emerging guerrilla

<sup>13</sup> Frank Marshall, "Fear No Evil," *Missions Frontiers*, June 1, 1989.

group Frelimo. But even when the Catholic priest told him that these men were just “a gathering of heretics,” he took no concern for justice, though he wondered why the common people brought so much food to the prisoner, as though he were someone important.

One night he was driving his truck with half a dozen prisoners in it and saw “what appeared to be a man in gleaming white, standing in the road, facing him.” He swerved so sharply that the truck rolled over and he was trapped underneath. The prisoners themselves lifted the truck so that the police chief could get out.

After brief treatment in the hospital he returned to talk to Martinho because he knew there was some connection between this vision and the prisoner. He entered Martinho’s cell and asked for forgiveness. Martinho told him about his need for God’s forgiveness and how to have it. The police chief said humbly, “Please pray for me.” Immediately the chief called for hot water so that the prisoner might wash, took him out of solitary confinement, and saw to it that a fair trial was held. Martinho was released.

But the most remarkable thing was what followed: “Not only did the chief of police make plain his respect for what Martinho stood for, but he also granted him official permission to travel throughout the whole area under his jurisdiction in order to preach and hold evangelical services.”<sup>14</sup> There would have been no way that such a permission would have been given through the ordinary channels. But God had a way through suffering. The imprisonment was for the advancement of the gospel.

#### *God Was Better Served in Prison*

On January 9, 1985, Pastor Hristo Kulichev, a Congregational pastor in Bulgaria, was arrested and put in prison. His crime was that he preached in his church even though the state had appointed another man the pastor, one whom the congregation did not elect. Kulichev’s trial was a mockery of justice, and he was sentenced to eight months imprisonment. During his time in prison he made Christ known every way he could.

When he got out, he wrote, “Both prisoners and jailers asked many

<sup>14</sup> Phyllis Thompson, *Life Out of Death in Mozambique* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), 111.

questions, and it turned out that we had a more fruitful ministry there than we could have expected in church. God was better served by our presence in prison than if we had been free.”<sup>15</sup> In many places in the world, the words of Jesus are as radically relevant as if they had been spoken yesterday. “They will deliver you to prison. . . . This will be a time for you to bear testimony” (Luke 21:12-13, AT). The pain of our shattered plans is for the purpose of scattered grace.

### 6. The Supremacy of Christ Is Manifest in Suffering

The suffering of missionaries is meant by God to magnify the power and sufficiency of Christ. Suffering is finally to show the supremacy of God. When God declined to remove the suffering of Paul’s “thorn in the flesh,” he said to Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for *my power is made perfect in weakness.*” To this Paul responded, “I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

Paul was strong in persecutions because “the power of Christ” rested upon him and was made perfect in him. In other words, Christ’s power was Paul’s only power when his sufferings brought him to the end of his resources and cast him wholly on Jesus. This was God’s purpose in Paul’s thorn, and it is his purpose in all our suffering. God means for us to rely wholly on him. “That was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead” (2 Cor. 1:9). The reason God wants this is because this kind of trust shows his supreme power and love to sustain us when we can’t do anything to sustain ourselves.

We began this chapter with this claim: loss and suffering, joyfully accepted for the kingdom of God, show the supremacy of God’s worth more clearly in the world than all worship and prayer. This truth has been implicit in the six reasons we’ve been looking at as to why God appoints suffering for the messengers of his grace. But now we need to make explicit that the supremacy of God is the reason for suffering running through and above all the other reasons. God ordains suffering

<sup>15</sup> Herbert Schlossberg, *Called to Suffer, Called to Triumph* (Portland: Multnomah, 1990), 230.

because through all the other reasons it displays to the world the supremacy of his worth above all treasures.

Jesus makes crystal clear how we can rejoice in persecution. “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, *for your reward is great in heaven*” (Matt. 5:11-12). The reason we can rejoice in persecution is that the worth of our reward in heaven is so much greater than the worth of all that we lose through suffering on earth. Therefore, suffering with joy proves to the world that our treasure is in heaven and not on the earth, and that this treasure is greater than anything the world has to offer. The supremacy of God’s worth shines through the pain that his people will gladly bear for his name.

*Gladly Will I Boast of Weakness and Calamity*

I use the word “gladly” because that’s the way the saints speak of it. For example, we just saw Paul saying, “I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses . . . insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities” (2 Cor. 12:9-10). He says the same thing in Romans: “We rejoice in our sufferings.” And the reason he gives is that it produces patience and a tested quality of life and an unflinching hope (Rom. 5:3-4). In other words, his joy flowed from his hope just the way Jesus said it should. And Paul makes clear that the reward is the glory of God. “We rejoice in hope of the glory of God” (Rom. 5:2). And so it is the supremacy of God’s worth that shines through in Paul’s joy in affliction.

We find the other apostles reacting the same way in Acts 5:41 after being beaten for their preaching: “Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name” (Acts 5:41). This fearless joy in spite of real danger and great pain is the display of God’s superiority over all that the world has to offer.

*You Joyfully Accepted the Plundering of Your Property*

Again the early Christians who visited their friends in prison rejoiced even though it cost them their possessions. “For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an

abiding one” (Heb. 10:34). Joy in suffering flows from hope in a great reward. Christians are not called to live morose lives of burdensome persecution. We are called to rejoice. “Rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings” (1 Pet. 4:13). “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet various trials” (James 1:2).

*The Love of God Is Better Than Life*

The basis for this indomitable joy is the supremacy of God’s love above life itself. “Your steadfast love is better than life. . . .” (Ps. 63:3). The pleasures in this life are “fleeting” (Heb. 11:25) and the afflictions are “light and momentary” (2 Cor. 4:17, NIV). But the steadfast love of the Lord is forever. All his pleasures are superior and there will be no more pain. “In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Ps. 16:11).

*Glad Suffering Shines Brighter Than Gratitude*

It is true that we should bear testimony to the supremacy of God’s goodness by receiving his good gifts with thanksgiving (1 Tim. 4:3). But for many Christians this has become the only way they see their lifestyles glorifying God. God has been good to give them so much; therefore, the way to witness to the reality of God is to take and be thankful.

But even though it is true that we should thankfully enjoy what we have, there is a relentless call in the Bible not to accumulate more and more things, but to give more and more, and to be deprived of things if love demands it. There are no easy rules to tell us whether the call on our lives is the call of the rich young ruler to give away all that we have, or the call of Zacchaeus to give away half of what we have. What is clear from the New Testament is that suffering with joy, not gratitude in wealth, is the way the worth of Jesus shines most brightly.

Who can doubt that the supremacy of Christ’s worth shines brightest in a life like this:

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss *for the sake of Christ*. Indeed I count everything as loss because of *the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord*. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as refuse *in order that I may gain Christ*. (Phil. 3:7-8, AT)

You cannot show the preciousness of a person by being happy with his gifts. Ingratitude will certainly prove that the giver is not loved. But gratitude for gifts does not prove that the giver is precious. What proves that the giver is precious is the glad-hearted readiness to leave all his gifts to be with him. This is why suffering is so central in the mission of the church. The goal of our mission is that people from all the nations worship the true God. But worship means cherishing the preciousness of God above all else, including life itself. It will be very hard to bring the nations to love God from a lifestyle that communicates a love of things. Therefore, God ordains in the lives of his messengers that suffering sever our bondage to the world. When joy and love survive this severing, we are fit to say to the nations with authenticity and power: hope in God.

*How Is Hope in God Made Visible?*

Peter talks about the visibility of this hope: “Hallow the Lord Christ in your hearts, ready always to give a reason to everyone who asks you for a word concerning the hope that is in you” (1 Pet. 3:15, AT). Why would people ask about hope? What kind of life are we to live that would make people wonder about our hope? If our security and happiness in the future were manifestly secured the way the world secures its future, no one would ask us about it. There would be no unusual hope to see. What Peter is saying is that the world should see a different hope in the lives of Christians—not a hope in the security of money or the security of power or the security of houses or lands or portfolios, but the security of “the grace that is coming to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:13, AT).

Therefore, God ordains suffering to help us release our hold on worldly hopes and put our “hope in God” (1 Pet. 1:21). The fiery trials are appointed to consume the earthly dependencies and leave only the refined gold of “genuine faith” (1 Pet. 1:7). “Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good” (1 Pet. 4:19). It’s the supremacy of God’s great faithfulness above all other securities that frees us to “rejoice as [we] share in Christ’s sufferings” (1 Pet. 4:13, AT). Therefore, joy in suffering for Christ’s sake makes the supremacy of God shine more clearly than all our gratitude for wealth.

