

## **Luke 23:32-46.**

### **Finding Purpose in Suffering.**

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Take a few moments and prayerfully consider the following four questions: Have you ever felt that you have suffered unjustly as a result of your unfair treatment by others? Where are some of the areas in which we find that we are mistreated? What happens when you feel mistreated? How do you respond to such treatment?

If our response to mistreatment is to become angry and then continue to maintain that anger, a process of emotional and spiritual destruction is initiated. Anger is not intrinsically a sin in and of itself. God's anger or wrath is spoken of often in the scriptures. Jesus demonstrated anger on occasions, particularly towards the opportunistic money-changers who had set up their businesses in the temple court, displacing the worshippers. Anger is simply an emotional response to an event. How we use that anger and deal with it makes all the difference.

When we maintain anger, a downward spiral of bitterness is started. When bitterness is well-established, we find ourselves spiraling downward even more in both emotional and spiritual depression. When unchecked, this process can diminish our perception of our own self worth. Harbored anger also severely impedes our spiritual growth since our focus is taken off of God as the source of life's blessings, and we concentrate on ourselves, our own hurts and our own desire for our own brand of "justice." Too many Christians find their ministry diminished or even virtually destroyed by unresolved conflict. If we have not learned how to deal with conflict, we can allow it to control us, rather than use the wisdom God has given us to take control of it. Jesus promised that in Him we would have life and be empowered to live it to the fullest.<sup>1</sup> Does our life feel very full when we succumb to the depression that follows unresolved anger?

We have all experienced and witnessed some level of suffering that comes from persecution. When we consider the unjust mistreatment of an innocent person, Christians often point to the brutal and tortuous death experienced by Jesus Christ. This study will look at Jesus' response to this mistreatment, and from it, maybe we can find some guidance on how to follow His example.

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<sup>1</sup> John 10:10/.

**Luke 23:32-33. *And there were also two other, malefactors, led with him to be put to death. <sup>33</sup>And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left.***

What took place immediately prior to this event? Jesus had been taken to the Roman army barracks and scourged on the body, beaten on the face with the fists of the Roman guards, and beat on the head with a stick while wearing a "crown" of thorns. A graphic depiction of Jesus' passion was presented recently in Mel Gibson's film, "The Passion of Christ." This film opened up discussions of the nature and details of Jesus' passion. Some asked me, "it was not really that bad and bloody was it?" My answer, based upon my understanding of the scriptures and the historical evidence is that the real event was far more violent than the movie depicted. A real scourging and crucifixion was not family entertainment, and could certainly not be shown in theaters. Here, the Messiah, the LORD of Creation, submitted Himself to the indignities and tortures at the hands of sinful, violent, and hateful men simply because He loved them enough to give His life for them. The human injustice of the events is unfathomable.

One's suffering at the hands of another is always predicated by conflict. There is always a systemic difference between the persecutor and the persecuted that leads the persecutor to violence. What was this difference in Jesus' case? He was simply perfect and right in a an imperfect and wrong world. Christians who are faithful to the LORD are also in opposition to this world, and as they express the nuances of a Spirit-filled life will experience varying degrees of conflict with it.

As much as we may have been misunderstood and mistreated, none of us has had to endure the physical, spiritual, and emotional brutality of the treatment that Jesus endured. For Him to be so mistreated at the hands of men is much more significant than any we might receive, since we are not without sin, and in almost any situation where we are feeling persecuted, we have not entered that persecution in a sinless state.

In the scripture just observed, we read Luke's description of the crucifixion. It is interesting that Luke does not include as much detail about the activity surrounding the occurrence. The nature of a crucifixion was well-understood by his ancient readers. Luke focuses more on the relationships surrounding the occurrence. First we see that Jesus was not crucified alone. He shared the hill of Golgotha with two thieves. Why do you suppose Jesus was crucified between them? Crucifying Jesus among two justly convicted

criminals maximized the ridicule of Him, and provided some veiled justification for their action.

If you think you have suffered ridicule and scorn, consider the state Jesus is in at this moment. To be crucified between two thieves is to be identified with them. During Jesus ministry, He was purposefully identified with the common people, referred to as "sinners" by the pious and pride-filled religious leaders. It is interesting that in death Jesus is still identified as being among sinners.

How have you responded in the past to situations where you, or those who your cared for, were treated unfairly? Did you seek swift and firm retribution and justice? Did you develop anger or hatred toward the persecutor(s)? Jesus' response serves as an example to all of us of what it means to be faithful to God, to the truth of the gospel, and to our calling as a Christian in such situations.

**Luke 23:34. *Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. And they parted his raiment, and cast lots.***

What was Jesus' response? Certainly, Jesus had the power to strike dead those who "defiled" Him in the same manner and context as those who died simply for touching the sacred Arc of the Covenant. A scene could have unfolded that would remind us of the destruction of Sodom. Instead, Jesus prayed to God, asking for forgiveness for those abusing Him. It is clear that the first thing that we need to do in a situation of abuse is to forgive the abuser. Is this an easy task? Such a response is contrary to everything our natural bent for worldly justice stands for. What will happen if we refuse to forgive the abuser? We suffer in a variety of ways that are not limited to the cycle of anger, bitterness and depression.

I have seen many folks continue to suffer several years after the event of their abuse, a suffering that would have been avoided if forgiveness was understood and implemented. Harbored unforgiveness serves as a continual reminder, keeping the pain from the wound fresh for many years. The victim of the abuse finds no closure when anger prolongs its agony. One characteristic of this type of unforgiveness is that the abused sees himself or herself as the only one abused. We see ourselves as the victim of the expression of another's sin, not realizing that expressed sin is not only exacted on a human victim, but upon God also. When the individual sins, conflict with God is also initiated. Note that Jesus went a step further than personally forgiving his persecutors. His forgiveness came in the form of a prayer to God, asking the Father to forgive them for what they were doing. When treated unfairly have you ever thought of praying that God would

forgive the abuser? Note that this, for us, may be easier than forgiving them ourselves, and can certainly be the first step in accomplishing that aim. By forgiving His persecutors, Jesus was simply demonstrating His nature and His words when He taught the disciples:

**Luke 6:27-28.** *But I say unto you which hear, Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you, Bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you.*

Forgiving the abuser is the first step in accomplishing the commands of Jesus recorded in Luke 6:27-28. We are taught to love those people. It is when we are called upon to love one who is abusing us that we are reminded that *agape* love, the true love that God empowers, is absolutely unconditional. When we love with *agape* love, no circumstances compromise that love, and when we love in this way, forgiveness is as natural as God's forgiveness towards us. It is not until we forgive the abuser and love them in God's love, can we gain victory over the anger that would subdue us. We may have to start by asking God for His help in our efforts to truly love the one who so grievously hurt us.

**Luke 23:35.** *And the people stood beholding. And the rulers also with them derided him, saying, He saved others; let him save himself, if he be Christ, the chosen of God.*

Some of the most obvious and difficult forms of abuse that we may suffer at the hands of another are those that are physical in nature. Physical abuse is rampant in our modern culture. However, another form of abuse is more silent and just as insidious: that done with words and actions. One of the most difficult kinds of mistreatment to take silently is that which comes from people who place themselves in unsubstantiated authority over you. It may be an incompetent boss, or even an overbearing spouse. Of all the people in the nation of Israel, who should have been the ones to rally to Jesus' support more than the religious leaders? However, they could not believe that Jesus was the Messiah. They lacked the competence to understand.

For Jesus to endure the mockery of those religious leaders silently can be an example to us to endure derision and persecution, and to do so forgiving and loving the ones doing the mocking.

**Luke 23:36-37.** *And the soldiers also mocked him, coming to him, and offering him vinegar, <sup>37</sup>And saying, If thou be the king of the Jews, save thyself.*

Sometimes, our persecution takes a similar form to this demonstrated by the Roman soldiers. We are mocked by others for not doing that which we are perfectly capable of doing, but do not because we would be compromising our belief and faith to do so. We can be encouraged to see that Jesus faced this form of abuse also. Jesus could have saved Himself, but to have done so would have been contrary to His nature, and God's ultimate plan. Instead, Jesus endured the pain without extricating Himself. Likewise when faced with conflict, the sin nature in us may want to strike out, smash up the place, and stomp away, extricating ourselves from the situation. Or, we may try to run from the conflict by trying to shut it out of our thoughts, a quite impossible and self-destructive way to deal with it.

Some have argued that the "vinegar" offered by the guards was a crude form of pain killer. Taking a pain-reducing drug would simply be another easy, but only temporary, way to ease the stress. God may not desire that we take the easy way out, but rather take His way out so that His purposes can be performed in the process.

The Holy Spirit of God empowers in us a spirit of gentleness, patience, and a self-control that can maintain a peaceful and forgiving response to such conflict. When we depend upon God's plan for dealing with conflict we have no need for an alternative "way out." God's way will suffice.

**Luke 23:38. *And a superscription also was written over him in letters of Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew, THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.***

What does it mean to be "branded," or to have a label put on you? Though the title of King of the Jews could have been appropriate, in this context it was meant to deride Him. Jesus must have felt hurt that they didn't understand that He truly was the King. In the 19th century American west, it was the practice among the military to "brand" a coward by painting a yellow stripe down the back of his uniform. This developed into an idiom whereby one who demonstrated cowardice was branded as "yellow." Some people are branded by others by the color of their skin. People can be cruel in the ways they express prejudice and ignorance when they brand and label one another based upon any number of criteria. Even Christians can find themselves "branded" by those who are ignorant of the faith and suffer any number of forms of prejudicial treatment. Regardless of the nature of the persecution, Jesus' example is one of forgiveness, patience, and self-control.

**Luke 23:39-41. *And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.* <sup>40</sup>But**

***the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? <sup>41</sup>And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss.***

Here we see contrasting responses to the witness of Jesus' crucifixion. Even one of the individuals crucified with him railed against him. The Greek word for *railed* is the same as the word that is often translated "blasphemed." The first criminal was thinking only of himself. Actually, when we observe the attitudes of the religious leaders, they were also thinking only of themselves as they fought to protect their authority.

One question I have learned to seriously consider when receiving any form of attack from another person is, "Is that person demonstrating the love of God in their action, and does he/she truly care for me"? If the answer is no, there is little reason for me to be concerned with their activity. I do not tend to give that level of authority to those who do not care for me. We certainly shouldn't let it hurt us when the other person doesn't care about us anyway.

However, there is a flip side to this. How can we respond when criticism comes from someone who truly cares for us and loves us and is demonstrating that love in the manner of their criticism? Where I might give little or no concern about the critic who does not care about me, I tend to give a lot of attention to the one who does.

***Luke 23:42-43. And he said unto Jesus, LORD, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. <sup>43</sup>And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.***

In this verse we see a tremendous example of the power of God's love to save. This individual was a convicted thief and was only moments away from his death, having never before heard or responded to the person of Jesus Christ. Still after a life of presumably godless living, God's grace is unconditionally extended to him in those final moments.

It would have been easy for Jesus, at this time of tremendous strife, conflict, and pain, to have overlooked the need of this one individual. After all, is this effort not to save the whole world? However, for Jesus to overlook the needs of this one individual would have been contrary to His character and His mission. Jesus' character was shown in His forgiveness of those who persecuted Him, and the demonstration of that character left Him able to continue His mission and ministry to the very end.

I have once heard it said that "when you are up to your neck in alligators it is hard to remember your first task is to drain the swamp." Our lives are full, and sometimes our lives are full of hungry and vicious alligators. We face stresses and conflicts that can easily distract us from our true calling. Had Jesus been less than who He was, He could have been overwhelmed by the stress of the cross. Yet, He was not. Note that His statement, "My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me,"<sup>2</sup> that was later stated on the cross was not a cry for desperation. Jesus was quoting from Psalm 22:1, a Psalm that is a detailed prophesy of the crucifixion of Jesus and describes God's grace in a time of profound pain. When we respond to abuse in a Godly way, we will not lose our focus on the "big picture:" the grace of God to work through and in all of the events of our life. When we rely on God we will not be overcome by the stress.<sup>3</sup>

**Luke 23:44-46. And it was about the sixth hour, and there was a darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour. <sup>45</sup>And the sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was rent in the midst. <sup>46</sup>And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost.**

Then, Jesus died. Those who would deny His death must deny the biblical account. Jesus was faithful to endure to the end.

**James 1:2-4. *My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.***

Jesus had every opportunity to "save Himself," but to have done so would have been inconsistent with His nature and purpose. As we experience the myriad of events in life, we often run into circumstances that we would like to run from. However, God has a purpose for us in the experiences of our lives. James writes here that "wanting nothing" comes from allowing a "perfect work," that is, a complete work. The process that God has put into place needs to work to its completion.

**Rom 8:28. *And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.***

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 15:34.

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 43:2.

Paul writes that "all things," not "some things" work together for good. That is, God has a purpose for His goodness and grace to be performed in all of the events of our lives, and when we endure sufferings in faithfulness there will always be an opportunity for God's grace to be demonstrated. Many who have experienced the most grievous sufferings, abuses, and persecutions have overcome them by God's grace, and are able to share testimonials of how God has used the events for His good purposes. Though we may not see the good purpose while we are still experiencing the stress of the conflict (remember the alligators!), we can trust in God's promise that His purpose is there with us, and He will bring us through if we will simply rely on Him.

**Romans 5:3-4. *And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; And patience, experience; and experience, hope.***

Jesus promised us an abundant life.<sup>4</sup> This verse shows us one of the paths to that abundance. Therefore, when we find ourselves in the valley of the shadow, remember that God has promised to bring good out of it for us, as we will be more useful to his kingdom when we allow Him to help us overcome. When we have overcome, our life and testimony can be used by God to help others who find themselves on the same road. Our faith is strengthened, and we are used by God to minister to yet another person in need.

As you are engaged in this study, you may be suffering the effects of abuse. You may be dealing with current events, or you may be harboring pain from an abuse you suffered long ago. Jesus gives us an example of how to appropriate God's strength in dealing with the events and overcoming their devastating consequences. We can recognize that, regardless of the depth of the abuse and suffering, if you love the LORD, God has a good purpose in it. As Christians we can follow Jesus' example of living a life of unconditional forgiveness that is based upon God's love and grace rather than our own system of reward and punishment. It is only in grace that we can forgive one who does not deserve it, just as God demonstrated his grace to us that while we were undeserving, Jesus died this brutal death for us.<sup>5</sup>

There is a way out of the suffering. It is a way paved by God's love and grace, and a way that promises the restoration of abundant life.

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<sup>4</sup> John 10:9-10.

<sup>5</sup> Romans 5:8.