

(T) Welcome to **Discipleship training On The Air**. In this teaching series, you will have an opportunity to learn about the practical life of the Christian community. Two teachers will teach from the Bible about Church building ministries. As you listen to this programme, make notes in a notebook or record the programme. Today's teaching is: SUFFERING AND GOD'S PLAN. We will learn what the Bible teaches about the way of suffering, the reasons for suffering, the Christian's reaction to suffering and the significance of suffering.

(S) **POINT 1. PEOPLE SUFFER IN MANY WAYS.**

First. Suffering has many forms.

Suffering comes to both Christians and non-Christians alike. Some people suffer, because they are sick or have a disability. They face a risky operation, or suffer a permanent physical handicap. Other people suffer, because they constantly see other people suffering. Some people suffer, because their plans, dreams and hopes have been shattered, or they feel that their craving for love and meaningful relationships has never been fulfilled. Other people suffer, because they see no purpose in life at all. Some people suffer, because they have marriage problems, or have a disappointing job. And other people suffer, because they feel guilty.

Many people suffer, because they cannot find an adequate answer to their burning questions. Their questions constantly taunt and torment them. For example they ask, "How can I reconcile suffering with a loving and almighty God?" "Why must I suffer? Why me, God?" "What have I done to deserve this suffering?" "How can anyone rescue me from this suffering?" "When will I be set free from all this suffering?" People are tormented by their unanswered questions. They are also tormented by seeing sick people suffering pain or by feeling helpless to do anything about it. They are tormented by their own feelings of anger and indignation at the supposed injustice or by their feelings of sorrow when they have to say farewell to a beloved who is dying. People are even tormented by their own fear of suffering and death. They are tormented with the anxiety whether they would be able to cope with their suffering or not. No matter in which form suffering comes, it always hurts and it is always difficult!

(T) **Second. Suffering needs room to express itself.**

People who suffer are looking for good answers. However, they must first have an opportunity to express their sorrow and time to digest their suffering inwardly. Many people in the Bible experienced pain and had emotions of sorrow or anxiety.

When Job lost all his possessions as well as his sons and daughters, he said, "Why did I not perish at birth?" (3:11) "I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil" (3:26).

When David was very sick and in danger of dying, he prayed in Psalm 30, "To you, O Lord I called; to the Lord I cried for mercy: What gain is there in my destruction, in my going down into the pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it proclaim your faithfulness?" (8-9). When David experienced great emotional anxiety when people persecuted him and circumstances turned against him, he prayed in Psalm 69, "Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold. I have come into deep waters; the floods engulf me. I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched. My eyes fail, looking for my God" (1-3). David weeps and fasts, because he is scorned, disgraced and shamed (10,19). In Psalm 142 he pours out his complaint before God, "No one is concerned for me. I have no refuge; no one cares for my life. ... I am in desperate need; rescue me from those who pursue me, for they are too strong for me" (2,4,6). And in Psalm 6 he prays, "I am worn out from groaning; all night long I flood my bed with weeping ... because of all my foes" (6-7).

Even Jesus expressed his suffering on the cross in loud cries, "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46).

Just like Job, David and Jesus, you may express your suffering. Take time to mourn. You may pray *the prayers of suffering* in the book of Psalms as a means to express your pain and anguish to God. God *is* interested in how you feel and he *is* concerned with your suffering. He sees your tears and remembers your cries for help!

(S) **Third. Suffering evokes reactions from other people.**

People not only react to their own suffering, but also to the suffering of others. Some people regard all suffering as a punishment for some personal sin. Therefore they judge suffering people in their hearts as *guilty* and regard their suffering as *a deserved punishment*. Therefore they can feel no pity for the suffering of others and cannot show any compassion to them.

However, Romans 12:15 teaches, "Mourn with those who mourn." And Hebrews 10:34 says that Christians "sympathise with those in prison". Hebrews 4:15-16 teaches that Jesus sympathises with our weaknesses and gives us mercy and grace to help us just when we need it. And 2 Corinthians 1:4 teaches, "God comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God." Christians need to visit the suffering people in the world and learn how to suffer together with them or how to comfort them. Christians need to learn when to pray for suffering people and when to help them practically in their suffering.

(T) **POINT 2. CHRISTIANS SUFFER FOR DOING GOOD.**

Christians must distinguish between suffering for doing what is wrong and suffering for doing what is right. Christians are called not to seek suffering for doing what is wrong, but to endure suffering for doing what is right. The prophets in the Old Testament often suffered for doing what is right. Jesus Christ suffered for doing what is right. The apostles suffered for doing what is right. And Christians are called to endure suffering for doing what is right.

First. Christians often suffer because they cannot change their conditions.

How should Christians regard slavery? During the New Testament times, slavery was still common and people often suffered under their harsh masters. 1 Peter 2:18 says, "Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect." These slaves were *house servants* who were in daily contact with their masters. The apostle Peter teaches that these slaves should subordinate themselves and obey their masters. They should submit to them *in fear*, because resistance was useless and would increase maltreatment. They should also submit to them *with all inward and outward respect*, because God demands this. They should submit, not only to masters who are good and considerate, but also to masters who are *harsh*. The word harsh means grumpy, pig-headed, unreasonable, capricious, unpredictable, and even unjust. The apostle Peter demands that Christian house servants subject themselves to their masters even when they are hard to serve, due to their unreasonable demands and injustice.

The slave-master relationship in the New Testament times may be applied to modern *employer-employee* relationships. The Bible demands that Christian employees submit themselves to their employers with respect. Christians should even submit to harsh and unjust employers with respect. Christians should continue to do good, to work hard, to be faithful and honest. However, when employers demand that their employees do things that are forbidden in the Bible, then the employees should gently resist their employers. For example, under no circumstance may Christian employees give or receive bribes, cheat or lie in business, steal or do any other kind of evil. When their employers maltreat or dismiss them, then they should endure this suffering with respect.

(S) **Second. Christians often suffer because they live a righteous life.**

In Matthew 5:10-12, Jesus says, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of *righteousness*, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." Christians are often persecuted, because they are righteous. To be righteous means that they are living a life in harmony with God's holy will. To be persecuted for righteousness' sake, means that other people do not like the way Christians live according to the Bible and so they persecute the Christians. They do not like Christians doing what is right in God's eyes and hating what is evil in God's eyes, and so they persecute them. Unrighteous people always want righteous people to join them in their unrighteousness. Throughout the centuries, Christians have been persecuted for the sake of Christ and his kingdom. Christians have been called atheists, because they did not worship a visible idol. Christians have been called immoral, because due to persecution, they often had to meet in secret places. Christians have been called unpatriotic, because they confessed loyalty to Jesus Christ as their King and refused to worship the Roman emperor. Hebrews 10:33-34 describes the sufferings of Christians: "Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You sympathised with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you had better and lasting possessions." Christians cannot avoid persecution. In 2 Timothy 3:12, Paul says, "In fact, everyone who wants to *live a godly life* in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."

(T) **Third. Christians often suffer because they are faithful witnesses of Jesus Christ.**

In Matthew 10:16-20, Jesus says, "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you."

The disciples of Jesus, as all servants of Jesus today, do not go out and invite persecution. No, Jesus Christ himself actually *sends* them out to preach the gospel, to teach the Bible and to help people. He *sends* them out among *wolves*, that is, among people in the world who will treat them viciously and destructively. As *sent ones*, the disciples of Jesus actually represent Jesus among the people and this means that Jesus is working through them. Jesus will be with them and will protect them. However, the disciples must be *shrewd as snakes* and *as innocent as doves*. Christians should be cautious in everything they do. They should try to gain insight into the people to whom they witness and discover what

the best way to witness to them is. Christians should also be innocent, that is, they should never compromise with evil. Jesus warned his disciples to “be on their guard against people” (17). After Jesus had ascended to heaven, people continued their hatred and opposition against the followers of Jesus. 1 Peter 4:12-14 teaches that the persecution against Christians is in reality a persecution against Jesus Christ. This means that when you are persecuted as a Christian, you are never far away from Christ’s presence and love, and from his strength and comfort.

Jesus said that his disciples would be handed over to the local Jewish courts, which were held in the synagogues. The punishment for crimes was flogging with a whip. The maximum was thirty-nine lashes (2 Cor 11:24). The disciples would be dragged before high officials, like governors and kings, who would judge them. This happened to both Jesus and Paul. It is important to notice that Jesus said that the purpose of this persecution is that the disciples witness to their judges. Sometimes persecution is the only way in which government officials hear the message of God’s love and forgiveness. The disciples should not worry about what they should say at that time, because the Holy Spirit will remind them of the words of Jesus and inspire them with courage.

(S) **POINT 3. THE REACTIONS TO SUFFERINGS.**

How should Christians react to suffering for doing good? 1 Peter 2:21-23 says, “To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ‘He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.’ When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.” Jesus did not pay evil people back by doing evil to them. When people beat him with fists and sticks, he did not threaten them. He could have threatened them with the armies of angels and judgement of God, but instead, he did not open his mouth.

However, Jesus Christ did not remain completely passive when he suffered for doing good. Verse 23 says, “Instead he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.” Whenever Jesus Christ suffered, he prayed and stated his case to God the Father. He handed over to God the right to judge every case. In his own time and way, God the Father will judge the unjust and wicked people. Therefore, Jesus Christ did not feel the need to retaliate or threaten. This is how all Christians should react to suffering for doing what is right.

(T) **POINT 4. THE SIGNIFICANCE OR VALUE OF SUFFERING**

The Bible teaches that the suffering of Christians is very meaningful.

First. Suffering produces obedience to God’s word.

Psalms 119:67, 71 says, “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word. ... It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.” When Christians face difficulties or persecutions, then these difficulties and persecutions drive them to find answers and comfort in the Bible.

(S) **Second. Suffering produces Christian character.**

Romans 5:3-4 says, “We rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces character; and character produces hope.” Christians can rejoice in their sufferings, because suffering has significance. Before people become Christians, sufferings were the expressions of God’s displeasure. After they have become Christians, sufferings are the beneficial manifestations of God’s love. Suffering produces different kinds of good characteristics in the Christian. For example.

Suffering produces joy. Christians rejoice *on account of* having sufferings. They consider it an honour to suffer for Christ, because Christ considers their sufferings as inflicted on Himself. Christians also rejoice *amidst* their sufferings, because they experience God’s reality and powerful help. They rejoice in the fact that sufferings are occasions for God to manifest his power in their support and deliverance. The Christian rejoices during suffering, because his problems become God’s possibilities!

Suffering produces perseverance. When Christians suffer, they develop patience and persistence. On the one hand, they learn to endure suffering patiently and on the other hand, they learn to faithfully persist in their duty. Perseverance produces character or approved integrity. When Christians persevere in their sufferings, they prove that God is faithful to them and also that they are faithful to God. Their suffering was a test, and because they persevered, God puts his stamp of approval on them! The result is that their integrity has been tried and approved. Character produces hope. While giving up in trials tends to weaken hope, endurance amidst trials tends to confirm and strengthen the hope, that we really are children of God.

(T) **Third. Suffering produces boldness and fruitfulness in Christian ministry.**

Philippians 1:12-14 says, “What has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. ... Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.” Paul’s example of suffering stimulated other Christians to become bold in their witnessing for Christ. In

1 Thessalonians 1:6-8, Paul says that the severe suffering of the Thessalonian Christians caused their faith in God to become known everywhere. When Christians suffer for Christ's sake in a way that honours Christ, then their suffering is noticed by very many people. Other Christians become courageous and bold to suffer as well. The death of Christian martyrs becomes the seed of the gospel. A famous writer said, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains. Christian suffering is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world".

(S) **Fourth. Suffering produces a manifestation of Christ's glory.**

1 Peter 4:14 says that if Christians suffer because of the name of Christ, then they are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on them. When Christians suffer for Christ's sake, then God's Spirit will shine divine glory through them. They will have a joy, peace and quiet trust in God which surpasses all human ability to do these things. Christians will be able to love and forgive their enemies, just as Jesus did. They will persevere even unto death, just as Jesus did. However, the perseverance of believers is to be attributed, not to the strength of *their love for God*, nor to anything else in themselves, but only to *the free and great love God has for them* in Christ (Rom 5:5-8).

(T) **Fifth. Suffering prepares Christians for the kingdom of God in heaven.**

2 Thessalonians 1:4-5 says that "all the persecutions and trials the Thessalonian Christians are facing is evidence that God's judgement is right, and as a result they will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which they are suffering. And in Matthew 5:11-12, Jesus says, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven."

(S) **ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK.**

First. Teach new believers what the Bible teaches about persecution and suffering. Encourage the Christians who are suffering for Christ's sake.

Second. See the workbooks "Go and build Christ's Church" and Internet on www.dota.net.

Third. Listen every SATURDAY to WEDNESDAY on the radio to "Discipleship training on the air".