

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, March 4, 1990, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

HEBREWS 2:10 and 5:8,9

“In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting
that God...should make the Author of
their salvation perfect through suffering.”

“Although He was a Son, He learned obedience
from what He suffered, and, once made perfect,
He became the source of eternal salvation
for all who obey Him.”

NO GAIN WITHOUT PAIN

Last Wednesday was “Ash Wednesday,” and it marked the beginning of the season of Lent, that period of the Christian year when we journey with our Lord as He went up to Jerusalem where He was to suffer and die.

Charles Swindoll tells how an athletic coach once gave him a T-shirt, on the back of which these words appeared in bold letters:

NO GAIN WITHOUT PAIN

which reminds us that if we are to mature in Christ, we must remember that it will inevitably involve suffering of one kind or another. We simply cannot become the people God created us to be without struggle and conflict and even heartache.

I read recently how some time ago the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* ran an article about an interesting notice that a reporter had spotted in a small-town barbecue restaurant. It read:

REWARD, Lost dog. Three legs, blind in
left eye, right ear missing, tail broken,
recently neutered. Answers to the name “Lucky.”

Some people think they’re “lucky” if they get through life without a scratch or a sigh. But they’re wrong. They’re wrong because Biblical teaching and personal experience combine to teach us that suffering is the path to holiness and maturity in Christ. There is always an indefinable something about people who have suffered. They have a fragrance that others lack. They exhibit the gentleness of Christ. I sometimes wonder if the real test of our hunger for holiness is our willingness to experience any degree of suffering or misunderstanding or abuse, if only thereby God will make us holy.

On this Communion Sunday, I want to tell you that the Cross of Christ is the path to mature holiness, It was for Him, and it is for us; and that brings me to these two wonderful verses from

the Letter to the Hebrews:

“In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God...should make the Author of their salvation perfect through suffering.”

“Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from what He suffered, and, once made perfect, He became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him.”

Notice how Jesus is called the “Author” of our salvation. That is one of the beautiful titles that the New Testament writers give to our Lord. The word in the Greek means “someone who begins something in order that others may enter into it.” For example, suppose a ship was foundering on the rocks, and suppose the only way for those on board to be rescued would be for one crew member to swim ashore with a line, in order that, once the line was secured, all the passengers and crew might follow. The one who was first to swim ashore would be the “author” of their salvation. So, what the writer is saying is that Jesus, by His atoning death, pioneered the way whereby we might come back home to God for our eternal safety and security.

How was Jesus enabled to become the Author of our salvation? We are told that God made Him “perfect” through suffering. Now, of course, this doesn’t mean that our Lord was ever “imperfect” in the sense that He had done wrong, for in other places the writer to the Hebrews is careful to underline His sinlessness. He says, “He was tempted in every way, just as we are, yet He was without sin” (4:15). And again, “He is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens” (7:26). The Greek verb which is translated “to make perfect,” comes from the adjective “teleios,” and in the New Testament “teleios” has a very special meaning. It is used, for instance, of a human being who is fully grown; or of a scholar who is no longer at the elementary stage, but who has a thorough grasp of knowledge in his field of specialization. So, in the New Testament sense, a person is “teleios” when he fully carries out the purpose for which God designed him and sent him into the world.

So then, what the writer to the Hebrews is saying is that through suffering our Lord was made fully adequate for the task of being the Author of our salvation. He was completely sinless; but although He was God, He was also a man, and as a human being He needed those experiences of suffering to become “teleios,” “mature.”

In particular, “He learned obedience from what He suffered.” Though He was the eternal Son of God, it was necessary for Him as the incarnate Son to “learn obedience.” Now, of course, He had never been disobedient; but as the end drew near, He was called upon to obey to an extent He had never before experienced. Think of His agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, and the temptation to turn His back on the cross. Think of the temptation He endured as the religious leaders of Israel, gathered at the foot of the cross, mocked Him and said, “He saved others, but He can’t save Himself!... Let Him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in Him! He trusts in God. Let God rescue Him now if He wants Him!” (Matthew 22:42,43). Fifteen hundred years ago, someone read the story of the death of Jesus to Clovis,

King of the Franks. Now Clovis was at that time a barbarian; but suddenly, as the story went on, his hand reached for his sword, and he drew it and exclaimed, “Oh, if only I had been there with my Franks! We’d have charged up the slopes of Calvary, and smashed those Romans, and saved Him!” And as Jesus hung there, enduring their bitter taunts and insults, He knew that at any given moment He could step down from the cross, and atomize His tormentors with the force of an atomic bomb! But if He had done that, He could not have died for our sins; He could not have become our Savior. But praise be to God—The Author of our salvation was made perfect through suffering!

The temptations He faced were horribly real, and the battle for victory was difficult, but where Adam failed and fell, Jesus resisted and prevailed. His humanity was thereby completed—it was made perfect—and on the basis of this perfection, He could become the Source of eternal salvation. So, you see, His sufferings were the testing-ground in which His obedience became full-grown and mature.

Now, if suffering was the means by which our sinless Lord became mature, how much more do we need it in our sinfulness. Significantly, James, in his letter, uses the same language of “perfection” or “maturity” in relation to Christians. Listen to what he writes:

When all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives, my brothers, don’t resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends! Realize that they come to test your faith and to reproduce in you the quality of endurance. But let the process go on until that perseverance is fully developed, and you will have become people of mature character (teleios), people of integrity with no weak spots. (James 1:2-4)

It is interesting to remember that Scripture uses three graphic images to illustrate how God uses suffering to make us holy and Christ-like:

- 1. The father-child picture.** In Deuteronomy 8:5 Moses says, “As a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you.” The metaphor is taken up again in the Book of Proverbs 13:24 where it is stressed that a father’s discipline is an expression of his love for his children—“He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him.” Then in Hebrews 12:7, 10-11 we are told, that God disciplines us only for our good, so that we may share in His holiness; that at the time, discipline is painful, not pleasant; but that later, if we do not rebel against the discipline, it results in a quiet growth in grace and character.
- 2. The picture of gold and silver being refined.** In Psalm 66:10, Isaiah 48:10, and Zechariah 13:9 it is made clear that the place of refinement for Israel was “the furnace of affliction”; and the Apostle Peter (1 Peter 1:6,7) applies this metaphor of the “furnace” to the testing of our faith in “all kinds of trials.” The process will be distressing, but through it, our faith, which is of greater worth than gold, will both be proved genuine, and result in glory to Jesus Christ.
- 3. The picture of the Vine and the branches,** in John 15:1-8. In this allegory the fruitfulness of the branches is a symbol of our Christ-like character. And, says Jesus, our fruitfulness as Christians will depend not only on our abiding in the Vine (i.e., keeping close to Jesus in love and obedience), but also on our being pruned by the Gardener. Pruning is a drastic process,

which often looks cruel, as the bush is cut right back and left jagged and almost naked. But when the summer comes 'round, there is much fruit.

All three metaphors describe a negative process, disciplining the child, refining the metal, and pruning the vine. But all three also underline the positive result—the child's good, the metal's purity, and the vine's fruitfulness. For this reason, we should never hesitate to say that God intends suffering to be a "means of grace" for the Christian. I'm sure many of you can re-echo the Psalmist's statement: "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey Your Word" (Psalm 119:67). For since God's love is holy love, it is concerned not only to act in holiness (as in the Cross of Christ), but also to promote holiness (in the people of God). As we have already seen, suffering fosters perseverance and purifies faith. It also develops humility, as when Paul's thorn in the flesh was to keep him from "becoming conceited" (2 Corinthians 12:7).

We should remember that the Christians for whom this letter was intended were primarily Jewish converts, people who were facing trial and suffering and slander and malice from family and former friends. Indeed, they were suffering persecution for their loyalty to their Messiah and Savior. And many of them must have been tempted just to give up, and renounce their faith. But the writer to the Hebrews urges them to press on, in spite of all the suffering it may involve; and he sets before them the example of our Lord Who set His face "like a flint," refusing to turn back, and was thus made "perfect through sufferings" which simply means that if He had not suffered, if He had not drunk the cup of anguish and death to the bitter dregs, He would never have known about our sufferings, and He would not have been able to help us in our times of need. "But," says our writer, "His example and His never-failing help can well encourage you to persevere. No hardship can befall you that has not already befallen Him; and so you can be absolutely sure that He understands and sympathizes with you, even as He offers you the power of the Holy Spirit to sustain you in every moment of need."

He says to them in chapter 4:15,16, "We don't have a Savior Who can't sympathize with our weaknesses. Remember, He was one of us! He was tested in every way, just as we are; but through it all He never sinned! And so, because of what He has done for us, we can approach God's throne of grace with absolute confidence, and receive mercy and strength to help us in our every time of need."

Three hundred years ago, our Scottish Presbyterian ancestors made paraphrases of many passages of Scripture, and sang them to the lovely old psalm tunes. Listen to the beauty of the paraphrased version of Hebrews 4:15, 16:

Though now ascended up on high,
He bends on earth a brother's eye;
Partaker of the human name,
He knows the frailty of our frame.

Our fellow sufferer yet retains
A fellow-feeling of our pains;
And still remembers in the skies
His tears, His agonies, and cries.

In ev'ry pang that rends the heart,
The Man of sorrows had a part;
He sympathizes with our grief,
And to the suff'rer sends relief.

I heard of a young man who had lost a leg in an accident. When he was able to be fitted with an artificial limb, he began to take physical therapy, but found it extremely exhausting. The therapist was gentle yet firm with him, and kept pressing him to go just a little farther in his efforts to walk. "You've got to do what I'm doing," he kept saying. In a moment of frustration and anger the young fellow blurted out— "Oh, it's all right for you to talk; you've got two good legs to walk on." Lifting the legs of his pants the therapist simply said, "Look.!" And that young man looked upon two artificial legs!

That's how it is with us and Jesus—and that is what our writer means when he says that "In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God... should make the Author of their salvation perfect through suffering."

And so, as our risen and triumphant Lord welcomes you to His Table this morning, He is surely saying to you, "My child, trust Me with your life. You may wonder why I allow certain things to happen to you and to those you love. But trust Me. I want you to mature in holiness. And if you follow Me obediently every step of the way, the day will come when you will 'bless the hand that guided and the heart that planned.' I know what you are going through, because I have gone through it too. Just remember that My grace is sufficient for your every need; and I will never leave you nor forsake you!"

AMEN.