

Lifebyte 55

Kingdom Living (Part 5)

Suffering — *Developing The King's Character*

Jesus Proclaims A Kingdom



*For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common?
Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? (2 Corinthians 6:14)*



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Introduction

Let's continue our discussion of life in loving service to our Lord and King Jesus. Two very real elements of Kingdom living are often overlooked in today's man-centered, self-gratifying Christendom: **suffering** and **persecution**. Yet the Word of God leaves no doubt that *how we respond* to suffering and persecution helps determine both our spiritual fruitfulness as well as our transformation into our King's likeness by His indwelling Spirit.

Suffering is of course interconnected with persecution. But in this Lifebyte we'll be dealing with suffering as it relates to your sanctification into the *character of our Lord Jesus*.

Suffering embodies the many "altar experiences" during which you respond to our Father's grace and take part in a wonderful exchange: you replace reliance on your sin nature-controlled soul with being ruled by the Spirit of Jesus through your spirit. Suffering is an *internal* mechanism that takes place in the unseen realm of your soul (mind, will, emotions) and spirit. It's *your response within* to what's going on around you.

Persecution, on the other hand, is the *reaction of others against you* because of your faith. It comes to you as a direct result of the stance you've taken for your King. Persecution runs the gamut from rejection and mistreatment to torture and martyrdom, and some measure of it is a given for those who follow Jesus as their Lord and King. For example, in the parable of the four types of soil, He indicated



that the person whose roots are shallow will quickly fall away *when* (not *if*) persecution comes because of His word.

Our King both calls us and empowers us to *identify with and embrace* the persecution that was heaped upon Him. To do otherwise would mean we deny Him.

For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the latter, we are the smell of death leading to death; but to the former, we are the sweet aroma of life leading to life... (2 Corinthians 2:15,16).

When have you last thought of yourself as the *aroma* of our Lord Jesus to others? As His followers, we're responsible to live in such a way that we "smell" like Him in character, speech and actions.

Almost everyone is aware of odors, whether appealing or repulsive. And what prompts pleasurable response to some (like a strong coffee smell) may provoke "Yuck!" from others! As Paul instructed his disciples in Corinth, the *Spirit of Jesus* in His own evokes a response to His presence one way or the other—even if it's subconscious in the people we meet.

As our sanctification continues and we're being transformed by His Spirit, we become more and more Christ-like. That is, our character and life *increasingly mirror our King*, Who rules us through our spirit.

This isn't just a concept but a *way of life* for Kingdom subjects—to be "Jesus-in-the-flesh" to others. Not only do we individually develop the aroma of Jesus as we yield to His Spirit at work in and through us, but **true fellowship** is based on our *collective* Christ-like aroma as extended spiritual family. This fellowship is the sweetest of all!

Those who “*smell like Jesus*” are strongly attracted to each other. The following anecdote illustrates in the physical realm that which takes place in the spiritual.

We spent ten years raising sheep at a retreat center because Mike had been asked to counsel clergy. Since the Bible refers so often to the relationship between “shepherds” and “sheep”, what better way to understand them than through firsthand experience!

When you’re around sheep for any length of time, you become identified with them by their odor. (There was never any doubt when Mike walked into the house that he’d been down to the barn!) Sheep have a flock identification gland in their front hooves. When they rub against each other, this gland gives the flock members a common smell. Their strong olfactory system compels them to be close to one another—they find security in their mutual identifying odor. This is why sheep flock together.

For followers of Jesus, *His Spirit* in each of us gives us our Lord’s aroma. And this aroma grows stronger as we’re increasingly sanctified into His likeness. However, one element of this aroma-building process of identification is so often overlooked.

A primary means of our Lord transforming us to be like Him is through *suffering* as we walk in His steps (1 Peter 2:21). As we suffer (and suffering is inevitable in this fallen world), we grow in our King’s likeness *if* we respond according to His Spirit at work in us.

Keep in mind that all who walk according to God’s Word bearing the testimony of Jesus will join our spiritual companion John the apostle in the “*suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus*” (Revelation 1:9).

Suffering — Our Lord’s Means To Train Fruitful Kingdom Subjects

No one enjoys suffering! But when we accept our Father’s Covenant in Lord Jesus, suffering is a vital component. You realize without doubt that Jesus suffered out of His loving obedience. Should our Father treat His children any differently by withholding that which helps to conform us to His Son’s image?

In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering” (Hebrews 2:10).

Why is suffering essential to our sanctification into Christ’s likeness? And what example of attitude does Paul set for the followers of Jesus in Rome, a decidedly unaccepting locale for Christians?

We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us (Romans 5:3-5).

Our Lord offers us a path of suffering in order to *produce hope* in us. Within a biblical framework, *hope* is synonymous with *confidence*. [Prove this for yourself. Use your concordance to go through the Psalms and substitute the word “confidence” for “hope”. See how well it fits!]

Why is hope necessary for our lives as people who walk in confidence in our King? Jesus tells us, “*the Kingdom of God is within you*” (Luke 17:21). Your sanctification is accomplished in the *unseen world* of your spirit and soul.

It’s a painful process to relinquish dependence on your sin nature-con-

trolled soul in order to become a Spirit-led subject of your beloved King. All throughout the suffering you endure as part of your sanctification, demonic voices will try to make you believe that Jesus has rejected you. They'll try to convince you of how dark your soul is so that you'll lose confidence in your Lord's love for you as His precious child.



Sadly, many people can't understand our Lord's glorious goal to produce *unswerving hope* within them. Consequently, they give in to despair and hopelessness. But the Bible assures us that our suffering is allowed by our King to produce both *His character and hope* in His followers. He is faithful to comfort you in the midst of whatever affliction you're enduring (Psalms 119:50). And, one of His beautiful names is the *God of hope* (Romans 15:13).

If you've gone through our series *Going To The High Places*, you're aware how the voices of self-pity and craven fear attempted to impede Much Afraid on her pilgrimage of sanctification. Every time she listened to those deceiving words she was filled with despair, doubting she'd ever walk in union with the Shepherd on the high places.

Our Lord knows that you're susceptible to the same demonic assault. Remember this. What kept Much Afraid going? Her *confidence* in the Shepherd's promise that she would one day be loved.

What hope do *you* need as you undergo suffering in your sanctification? You need confidence that there is a worth-

while purpose for your suffering. Is the development of the character of Jesus within you a sufficient goal for you? This is important, because suffering without purpose is no more than torture. Standing firm in *why* you're suffering and embracing its noble goal is crucial for you so you'll keep pressing on.

Would you say that the *purpose* of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross—to pay the penalty for our sins and reconcile us to the Father so that we might enjoy intimate union with His Spirit and eternal life—was enough of a goal for Him to endure such suffering?

Looking to Jesus, the Author and Perfector of our faith, Who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:2).

In the same light, would you consider it a joy for *you* to endure whatever suffering is needed for you to be the aroma of Jesus to others? Really, are you prepared to suffer whatever is necessary to be like Jesus to others, or are you hesitant? If you're hesitant, then discover why you lack confidence (hope) in Jesus and in His means of reproducing Himself in you.

The Apostles Affirmed The Importance of Perseverance And Trials

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything”

(James 1:2-4).

The apostles showed no hesitation in standing firm in their trials. In fact, they

rejoiced in the honor of suffering shame for the sake of Jesus (Acts 5:41)! The testing of your faith involves some measure of suffering, and that's how your *perseverance* is matured.

A simple definition of perseverance might be this: *A heart devotion to hang in there no matter what the cost.* To endure under great trial demands a cherished enough goal that will carry you through the suffering. A woman who is in labor to deliver her baby understands this connection. We Kingdom subjects of our King must have the same intense confidence in our Lord's goal for our suffering: that His likeness will be growing more and more within us until we see Him face to face!

God's Word as well as church history recount episode after episode of those who have persevered in suffering because their lives were so devoted to the Jesus in them. But perhaps your experience parallels ours. In our 31 years of following Jesus we've encountered so few who have been put to the test via suffering in their faith and have emerged rejoicing in His faithfulness.

But that *victorious trust* is the fertile soil for testimony that impacts other people's lives! And fruitful soil is life-giving, not fruitless as are the other parable soils lamented in Mark 4:1-20. Seed which is sown on good soil hears, accepts and bears fruit, *"some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred."* Isn't your suffering worthwhile when you think about how your loving perseverance can soften the soil of other people's hearts?

Nicolaitan religious systems frown on hardship and suffering as a means of bringing glory to our Lord. The worldly pursuit of self-gratification and instant convenience have invaded modern

churched culture so that identifying with the suffering of Jesus is a foreign concept, another gospel! If you're honest with yourself, you may have bought into a belief that if someone is suffering, there must be something wrong with their faith or their life. Not so!

The demonic "Health and Wealth gospel" that's widely embraced throughout western Christendom places personal satisfaction at the center of faith practice. Therefore it's no surprise that sacrificial service on behalf of the King is unheard of among their clergy. After all, from this framework, our Lord is responsible to bless people and make them happy.

Suffering, perseverance, and sanctification into the character of Jesus are foreign concepts throughout most of western Christendom today. Yet the beloved of the King are warned to *expect* fiery trials rather than question them. The apostle exhorts with timeless words all who love and serve Jesus:

But rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you (1 Peter 4:13,14).

- **How do you feel about the suffering and perseverance that come with following Jesus as Lord and King in His Kingdom?**

- **Do those who know you well in the faith consider you a persevering person, or one who gives up or gets frustrated easily?**

- **Do those who know you well in the faith consider you confident in hope in your relationship with our Lord? Relate an incident to validate your response.**

- **Paul commends the called-out ones in Corinth, “And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:18). What trials or suffering are you going through as a result of your faith in Jesus? Describe your inner and outward responses to these trials.**

Suffering: A Spiritual Bond In Our Relationship With Our Lord

*For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to bring you back again into fear; on the contrary, you received the **Spirit, who makes us sons and by whose power we cry out ‘Abba!’ (that is, ‘Dear Father!’). The Spirit Himself bears witness with our own spirits that we are children of God; and if we are children, then we are also heirs, heirs of God and joint-heirs with the Messiah — provided we are suffering with Him in order also to be glorified with Him (Romans 8:15-17).***

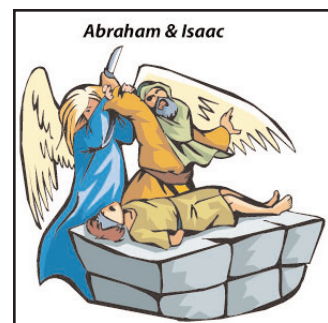
It would be so simple if we could just bask in our Father’s care here on earth and then be beamed into heaven before trials or suffering cross our path. However, that notion just doesn’t float in the Kingdom of God.

We can rejoice because it’s in the *midst of our troubles* that our God shows Himself faithful as our refuge and strength (Psalms 46:2). Peter didn’t tell anguishing followers of Jesus to pray that their trials be snatched away from them. On the contrary, he comforted them with the reality that *through fiery trials* their trust would be found authentic when Lord Jesus returns:

Rejoice in this [assurance of deliverance on the Last Day], even though for a little while you may have to experience grief in various trials. Even gold is tested for genuineness by fire. The purpose of these trials is so that your trust’s genuineness which is far more valuable than perishable gold, is judged worthy of praise, glory and honor at the revealing of Jesus the Messiah (1 Peter 1:6,7, CJB).

Our Lord is determined to test the genuineness of our trust in Him. The pattern of testing faith for authenticity was established in

Abraham, the “father of all who trust” (Romans 4:12,16,18). Just picture yourself having waited decades for the child God promised you. Now He calls you by faith to offer him as a sacrifice of obedient trust (Hebrews 11:17-19). Has it ever occurred to you that Jesus offers opportunity time after time to *each of His beloved* to evidence their love and obedient trust in



Him? Get hold of this now or you'll misunderstand the circumstances our Lord establishes in your life to test your trust.

An old poem begins, "*How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.*" All of us have at one time or another questioned the heart devotion of others toward us. This is particularly true in "Value-based Relationships"—those in which you choose to develop relational intimacy with one another. [For more on different types of relationships, see Lifebyte 42. "*Ministering Spiritual Freedom To Others*".]

Have you ever wondered about your relationship with Jesus from our Lord's vantage point? The Apostle Peter had first-hand experience with his faith being tested, since he was among those repeatedly admonished for being men of "*little faith*" (Matthew 8:26; 14:31; 16:8).

Note that it wasn't just divine intervention, whether calming of the seas or multiplying the loaves and fishes, that challenged Peter's faith so it could be tried and purified. Even the devil was permitted to break through Peter's defenses.

'Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail. And when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brothers.' But he replied, 'Lord, I am ready to go with you, both to prison and to death.' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, Peter, the rooster shall not crow this day before you will deny three times that you know Me' Luke 22:31-34).

You may notice that Jesus did nothing to prevent the testing of Peter's faith. He only said that He prayed that Peter's faith would not fail. And while Peter did deny Jesus, our Lord's grace prevailed and he was restored through his repentance.

Our King wants to be assured about both your *trust in* and *love for* Him. His greatest commandment for all of us repeats the same level of devotion called for in the called-out Israelites: "**Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind**" (Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:37). Now recall the manner in which our Lord restored Peter: The apostle was asked to *affirm his love* for Jesus and *evidence that love* by caring for His own after His ascension (John 21:15-17).

Multiple examples in the Older Testament reveal the essential matter of the *heart* in relation to authenticity of love for God. Half-heartedness was, and is, unacceptable before our holy and righteous God:

[Abijah] committed all the sins his father had done before him; his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his forefather had been (1 Kings 15:3).

Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the LORD as he did—with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, in accordance with all the Law of Moses (2 Kings 23:25).

God left [King Hezekiah] to test him and to know everything that was in his heart (2 Chronicles 32:31).

Don't think that our Lord, who tested the faith and love of people in both the Older and Newer Testaments, isn't doing the same today for *you*. If you can clearly grasp this truth, you'll view the circumstances in your life in a whole new light. You'll recognize suffering as our Lord's means to *draw you closer* to Him, not drive you away into hopelessness. In this light, suffering is designed

to make you *more dependent on your King*. And if you respond as His indwelling Spirit intends, suffering produces the character of the King in you.

The Bible focuses prominently on Christ-like character development. A wise person once said, “**Character is who you are when no one is looking.**” The Greek word for *character* means “minting a coin”. An image is impressed on the coin, an image that anyone can recognize. For followers of Jesus, the Bible presents clear guidelines of the type of Christ-like character He wants to impress into us through the working of His Spirit.



Let’s revisit Paul’s encouragement in Romans 5:3-5: “*suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.*” Character is a bonding agent, producing confidence (hope) in our Lord. One might say that the more of the King’s character you have, the more confidence you have in your relationship with Him as He continues His sanctifying work in you.

Before you answer the questions below, ponder in your heart how important *perseverance* is in your pilgrimage to salvation. “*Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love Him*” (James 1:12; see also Matthew 24:13).

- **How relationally bonded are you with your Lord? When you read, “*We are also heirs, heirs of God and joint-heirs with the Messiah—provided we are suffering with Him*”, is the idea of suffering a positive or negative thought for you? Describe your feelings.**

- **How do you feel realizing that our Lord sets up events to see how devoted your faith and love are in Him?**

- **Describe some times when your faith was put to the test and how you responded. Maybe you heard someone using “Jesus Christ” as a expletive. Or, you had an opportunity to pray for someone in need right in your school, neighborhood, or workplace. How did you feel after you responded the way you did? Was your trust uplifted by your obedient trust, or were you convicted by your reticence?**
