

## PART THREE: SUFFERING – A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

### *Prologue: Drastic Means*

*(This meditation was written on Saturday, 7<sup>th</sup> October 2006. It expresses the way personal failure can tempt one to unbelief.)*

When I used to sign on as unemployed,  
 I nearly gave up on you Lord  
 In the slowly shuffling dole queue  
 Full of blank, despairing, resentful faces  
 I thought in my heart  
 'This is a useless God I serve,  
 He's brought me nothing but 'FLOP'  
 Failure, loneliness, oppression and poverty  
 He's done nothing,  
 He says nothing,  
 He brings nothing  
 In my wretched trouble-filled life except  
 Destitution, disillusionment and despair

Time now to ditch this ineffective, useless deity  
 Who promises great things and then does nothing;  
 He can't even provide for my family!  
 Time now to follow some other God,  
 Time now to ditch Christianity and find some other saviour  
 Time now to repudiate this delusory faith I once followed so fervently  
 I'm far better off without this Christ!

But through drastic means  
 You turned me around  
 In your mercy you re-directed my life  
 And, one step at a time  
 You gradually restored my fortunes and  
 Gave as much blessing as I could cope with  
 In your mercy you opened doors of opportunity  
 Providing worthwhile employment  
 And marvellously renewing my faith –  
 Will you not do the same again

### **3.1 The Golgotha Experience**

There are many causes of tribulation. Physical ill health, circumstantial pressures, mental distress, emotional turbulence and negative spiritual influences all conspire to bring us down. As was seen in the first Chapter, God and Satan may be at work, but for two utterly opposed motives. The former, longs to make our suffering redemptive by building us up in his love, (even though this may involve painful discipline) whilst the latter seeks only to make our suffering nihilistic because his aim is horribly simple – to destroy and kill. Often *'the enemy of souls'* does this by ensnaring people into a restrictive, narrow religious lifestyle, which eventually causes them to turn against God altogether. For the devil, bad religion is better than no religion.

It is arguable whether suffering is worse for men than for women. Men tend to have a stronger sense of pride and a less fraught emotional life than their female counterparts; but their ability to cope with pain is less, as is their capacity to carry on as normal. Perhaps the wisest way to answer this fascinating question is to actively avoid this sweeping gender generalisation and to assume that, broadly speaking, tribulation is just about as bad for men as it is for women.

The reason that tribulation may be compared to Golgotha (the location of our Lord's death) is that, like Jesus, we are broken, both slowly and painfully. We become humbled through a multitude of trials and the realisation slowly dawns that, without Jesus in the centre our lives, we can do nothing constructive. As these trials are endured we actively turn to Christ for help.

In his goodness the Lord knows that we have little strength. Although he may, for a time, withdraw blessings from his children he will never withdraw their ability to endure that withdrawal. If this sounds too good to be true read I Corinthians 10:13, which is most dogmatic on this point; *"There hath no temptation taken you but such that is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able, but will, with the temptation also make a way of escape that ye may be able to bear it."*

### **3.2 The Anguish of Tribulation**

During tribulation the human mind is subjected to all manner of strong feelings - commonly called '*passions*.' (A passion is any intense emotion welling up spontaneously from deep within. Its chief effect is to temporarily cloud all rational judgement and to induce a false analysis of the current situation. Reason itself has been completely ousted by emotion. This can only be detrimental for the individual concerned.)

Knowing the dangers of passion, the Christian currently undergoing tribulation actively turns to Christ – seeking his assistance. God's help is so desperately needed at this time. The Christian may well be feeling like a blind man, tentatively fording his way across mossy stepping stones across a raging river torrent. It is indeed the case that suffering can make even the strongest individual feel completely helpless. Everyone, including God, seems to be arrayed against the sufferer and this leads to bitter regrets over life itself. Having slipped into the torrent the Christian gets swept away by despair. Death is longed for and romantic notions entertained about suicide. The fact that the sufferer was ever born also appears to have been a terrible mishap. Our sentiments echo those of the Patriarch Job whose protest at losing everything is recorded in Job 3:11-19: -

*"Why died I not from the womb? Why did I not give up the ghost when I came out of the belly? Why did the knees prevent me? Or why the breasts that I should suck [feed me]? For now should I have lain still and been quiet, I should have slept: then had I been at rest, With kings and counsellors of the earth, which built desolate places for themselves; Or with princes that had gold, who filled their houses with silver: Or as an hidden untimely birth I had not been; as infants which never saw light. There the wicked cease from troubling and there the weary are at rest. There the prisoners rest together; they hear not the voice of the oppressor - the small and great."*

As if to pile on the agony, nostalgic hankerings for a better past both haunt and taunt the sufferer. Overlooked is the wise advice of Ecclesiastes 7:10, which states, *"Say not thou, 'what is the cause that the former days were better than these? For you not enquire wisely concerning this.'"* Old sins, real or imagined, rise up like an army of accusers to condemn the sufferer at the bar of their own justice. One feels completely unforgiven. Part of the anguish of tribulation is an inability to concentrate on anything positive. A massive amount of self-analysis is generated because suffering tends to crystallise the mind, causing it to try hard to find answers that would make any sense. However, such dismal probing tends only to worsen the self-loathing because looking inwardly at the human heart exposes nothing but vile corruption.

With our fondest desires overruled by the cruel hand of fate, everything looks hopeless. Indeed, suffering may reach such a pitch that we end up being at a loss for words. The ceaseless chatter of the mind is now silenced into dumb apathy. Having reached such a state, we have sunk below the point of self-questioning. As rock bottom is reached, we feel heartbroken and victimised. Gradually we are making the unpleasant discovery that brooding is the life-blood of self-pity. Carried to an extreme it is literally deadly, because it lays the foundation for a successful suicide. Alternatively, we may become obsessive, longing for the cause – or causes – of our ordeal to go away. This is a particularly strong temptation in cases of physical infirmity where the sufferer can think of nothing else but the sickness in question.

This frustration often gives rise to the well-known peevishness of invalids. They become unpredictable in their behaviour, desperate for company one minute and hating it the next. Those who try to help them never know where they stand. Sometimes a vicious cycle occurs in which mental anxiety worsens the physical ailment, whilst the physical ailment worsens the mental anxiety. Much skilful pastoring is needed to break this cycle.

At the psychological level the effect of prolonged tribulation is absolutely draining. Unless blessed with a persistent re-anointing of the Holy Spirit the Christian ends up feeling like an empty husk. All that lies within is a dry deadness - any remaining trace of hope having long since evaporated like puddles under a desert sun. Because of this distress, tribulation often fuels the very real desire to escape. The sufferer wants to run away even though this may be the very worst reaction. It is similar to that of the author in Psalm 55:6 who, in great distress, exclaimed, *"Oh that I had wings like a dove! For then would I fly away, and be at rest."* Alternatively, if physical escape becomes impossible the sufferer may take refuge in his or her own fantasies. Instead of trying to face up to problems he or she retreats into a world of their own. Here, the mental pressure of an ordeal has caused a near psychological collapse, which only worsens matters still further.

Should an individual be more intellectually than imaginatively inclined, there is the temptation to get bogged down in ceaseless questioning. Difficult questions such as *'Is the existence of suffering compatible with an all-loving, all-powerful God?'* are asked again and again but no answer seems to come. Given that such issues are usually only broached in times of extreme debilitation, it's hardly surprising that the result of all this intellectual self-flagellation is only more distress. Common logic suggests that the best place to deal with such imponderable philosophical questions is the lecture room, not the hospital bed. In tribulation there just isn't the energy to deal with such intellectual questionings. It's only after a trial is over that a less fraught, more objective understanding of circumstances can emerge.

Another characteristic of tribulation is the fact that it can place a tremendous strain upon human relationships. The following attitude is all too common amongst those undergoing tribulation. *'I've got nothing to lose, I can say what I like and be as disagreeable as I wish.'* Suffering is indeed the great destroyer of courtesy. Things are made worse if the person subject to the Golgotha experience has been badly let down by others and/or has become the victim of unfounded rumour. Gossip is like further nails being hammered into the cross and it serves to wear down the sufferer still further. There may be a very real desire to hit back at the gossipmongers. The sufferer wants others to feel their pain. This may lead to behaviour patterns calculatingly designed to hurt others. Sometimes this desire to lash out is almost irresistible and would be irresistible but for the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. The anguish of tribulation has made a person so inward looking that they have become consumed by their own lust for vengeance. An impenetrable wall of bitterness surrounds them.

For the honest believer in Jesus Christ, there is the added temptation to envy those godless people who stand outside the Household of God. On occasion, the most galling thing about suffering is to see evildoer's triumph. They get feted with honours whilst the sufferer remains in impoverished obscurity. Their sentiments echo those of Psalm 73:12, which angrily protests, *"Behold, these are the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase in riches."* All attempts at goodness and virtue seem meaningless and the sufferer begins to slide into the trap of envying the wicked. Life seems so unfair. However, the sufferer is unable to perceive that evildoers' successes are largely illusionary. They will derive no eternal benefit from them.

However, it would be dangerously misleading to assume that it is only one's own personal suffering which provoke these reactions. It may be that the pain of those nearest and dearest to us produces these effects. For a parent, nothing is worse than seeing their own children suffer horribly, (Lamentations 2:10-11 & 4:3). In fact, such a witness to infantile agony can be the worst wound of all. Feelings of guilty helplessness pervade as we yell out *'Where is God in the suffering of children?'* Significantly, during the long woeful siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586BC, it was the pitiable plight of the little ones, which was the hardest sight of all to bear. The danger here is that the poverty usually associated with such distress, may

lead to a considerable hardness of heart. In the above-mentioned siege mothers were driven to eat their own offspring, because of the awful pangs of hunger, (Lamentations 4:10).

### **3.3 Hard Lessons**

Up to present, the writer has taken a somewhat detached viewpoint toward suffering. Only the peripheries of tribulation's horrors have been explored; the centre is reached when God appears to be completely absent in our plight. At the receiving end of perceived divine indifference, we may view God as either some wrathful Jehovah, forever hurtling down his thunderbolts, or as some sleepy neglectful landlord who just can't be bothered to help us. Our whole perception of spiritual reality has become distorted. As a consequence, much resentment is stirred up. We long for the Almighty to intervene in our favour and yet he doesn't, and this, to our eyes, makes him look callous and unjust. Dominated by our passions we scream out *'It's alright for you stuck up there on your heavenly throne surrounded by crowds of angels, what about us down here who are going through it?'* We may blame him for all of the injustices present in society, especially if we are on the receiving end of those injustices.

The whole situation is worsened by the problem of unanswered prayer. Here, all our fervent requests appear to bounce off a rubber ceiling. The loved one for whom we so fervently begged for healing dies; the estranged friend with whom we greatly desired a reconciliation abruptly severs all contact; the colleague at work whose salvation we petitioned for remains obdurate in his or her unbelief, whilst the personal blessing which, in our eyes was so badly needed, is still withheld. Of all failures, failure in one's prayer life is the hardest to endure. In bitter disillusionment we begin to turn away from God himself. One feature common to all forms of tribulation is the tremendous sense of isolation; when all of life's usual props are kicked away and we appear to be left alone, estranged from God and other people.

In the throes of such a grim period, the most comforting promises of Scripture assume an unreal air, their lofty reassurances of divine provision contrasting sadly with our present situation. Even the majesty of God himself conspires to mock us. He promises much but seems feeble and incapable of implementing his own words. Indeed, when the deity is not perceived as a wrathful Jehovah or a sloppy landlord, he takes on the guise of a feeble weakling who is UNABLE to do anything for us. Perhaps this last image is the most terrifying of all. Under our breath we are tempted to mutter *'It is in vain that I looked to God for help.'* Alternatively we may sourly conclude, *'I won't bother to ask God for help – he can't do anything useful at all.'*

Naturally, in the throes of our personal ordeal, we contemplate fearful alternatives. Full reign is given to our morbidity as we begin to wonder whether the Lord has permanently forsaken us. In a spirit of self-pity – that poison of all hope – we feel that, as our own good deeds have availed us nothing then God himself is not to be trusted, Again we are tempted to utter *'Lord, haven't we done our best?'* Such misapprehensions may well have had their origin in some false teaching, which will have encouraged us to place undue reliance upon our own efforts to please God without reference to His power.

Loaded with questions, we slip into the trap of trying to argue with the most high, our hearts heavy with bitterness. We ask *'Can't you see what is happening Lord? Where are you? Won't you do something?'* At the last extremity, we may even be reduced to the pain-filled expression, *'Why Lord? Why?'* Bewilderment is increased when no direct answer to these questions materialises. Hurt by such divine intransigence, we feel that there is no one to turn to for help. In response to all of this we may lapse into a further cycle of anger and depression. Stored up tension erupts into sudden outbursts of temper, which, being bitterly regretted afterward, lead only to further depression and greater tension. Our inner weakness becomes more profound. Neither in our external situation nor in our inner thought lives do we seem to exercise any degree of control, which naturally increases our frustration. Tribulation brings us face to face with the stark reality of our own frailty. We are so overwhelmed and bound up within our *'self'* that dying to this inner self-will can like crucifixion, be a long and very painful process.

Almost imperceptibly we are hardening into unbelief, (that stubborn rebellious disposition to reject the word, will and love of God). Such unbelief may be either passive – where we come to casually disregard the claims of Jesus in our lives, or active – where we violently refuse to have anything at all to do with spiritual matters. Originating in a failure of humility, unbelief drives us away from the truth and encourages us to seek sympathy for its own sake. We are discovering the hard way that self-pity is the key that unlocks the door of Hell. Much endless misery is to be gained through its use.

One particularly grim complication concerning tribulation is that if God seems terrifyingly absent then the devil is most certainly not. Just as he did with Jesus near the end of his retreat in the wilderness, *'the enemy of souls'* often strikes hardest when we are at our lowest ebb. Seizing the opportunities presented by this kind of situation, he bombards our minds with a deluge of foul, negative thoughts, which at times reach such a crescendo that it seems we simply must break. Sanity itself appears to be jeopardised when wave upon wave of darkness crashes down upon us. Only with hindsight do we realise that only the mighty power of Jesus brought us through. A lot more could be said about this kind of spiritual warfare, but this is beyond the scope of this work. Put succinctly, when God is far off the devil often seems to draw near and the sufferer is engaged in a spiritual battle of the first magnitude. The seriousness of this subject cannot be overstressed.

However, the sufferer (and those caring for them) must avoid lapsing into a spiritual paranoia, which sees hobgoblins everywhere. Equally important, they must avoid ascribing to supernatural causes symptoms resulting from a medical disorder.<sup>1</sup> Suffering ought not be an excuse for endless *'demon chasing.'* Instead, there should be the quiet confidence that Jesus will unambiguously expose the presence of any demonic influences should there be a need to do so, (Mark 1:21-28). In spiritual matters, there is no need for Christians to waste time playing the role of amateur detective. The sons of Sceva who did try to play it became badly unstuck and made fools of themselves in public, (Acts 19:13-20). Indeed, serious defilement can result from an unhealthy obsession with the powers of darkness, (Jude 8-10).

Finally, discussing the feelings which accompany suffering is one thing – after all, any comfortable well-paid philosopher, preacher or psychologist can do that, - but to present a record of those feelings as they are actually *'played out'* is quite another. Therefore, as a close to this Chapter a copy of an essay, written in late spring of 1984, will follow. It *'plays out'* the feelings of tribulation experienced by the writer himself. Some additional paragraphs were inserted during another period of severe trial in September 2005. These incorporated other lessons the writer had learnt in subsequent afflictions.

### **3.4 The Absence of God**

*"This article looks at the depression, which may arise when all sense of spiritual reality is gone and God seems completely absent from one's life.*

*Briefly, 'the absence of God' is defined as a loss of a sense of spiritual reality tempting one to believe that God is remote, unfeeling and uncaring. It leads to a loss of joy, a sense of unease, and to other negative feelings like anger, depression and guilt. There is no awareness of being loved by God.*

*Recently, I too have been undergoing – or rather dragged - through the absence of God. This problem may have a variety of causes, ranging from sudden bereavement and illness, to a long-standing frustration at work, or to difficulties in one's family situation. However, in my own case experiencing the absence of God was triggered by a prolonged period of unemployment. At the time, (March-June 1984) my overall mood was one of great dreariness as each wearisome day succeeded each wearisome day - with always the same sort of letter coming through the post, beginning with the words 'Dear Sir, we regret...' Indeed, every morning seemed to bring some fresh disappointment. The overall effect was a steady erosion*

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<sup>1</sup> In 1987, the writer learnt of an Independent Pentecostal House Group who attempted to cast demons out of a man suffering from clinical manic depression. The writer had to spend some time unravelling some of the problems caused by this group of amateur exorcists. Thankfully this man recovered and went on to live a fruitful Christian life.

of my faith. As a fully qualified and experienced graduate, married, with two young children my life seemed to be in ruins, and I blamed God for it. Even communion, hitherto the high point of weekly worship lost its excitement, becoming instead a dreary ritual. Worst of all passages like 1 Timothy 5:8<sup>2</sup> would leap up to accuse me – even though I had applied for about fifty-five jobs.

In my despair I felt that God was utterly useless. Like a politician, he appeared to make wonderful promises only never to keep them. I seemed to be following 'a do nothing deity.' These words from Jeremiah 14:8-9a accurately reflected my sense of disappointment.

"O the hope of Israel, the saviour thereof in time of trouble, why should thou be as a stranger in the land, and as a wayfaring man that turn aside to tarry for a night? Why should thou be as a man astonished, as a mighty man that cannot save?"

Present was the temptation to believe that I was following a false God. Christianity appeared to be a cruel delusion and my faith was near breaking point. Almost any religion appeared preferable to the one revealed in Scripture. Rather like complaints to the government, my prayers either didn't get through or came back marked 'rejected.' Various negative images of the Almighty crowded into my mind. From my perspective, he was an ineffectual weakling, a cold-hearted bureaucrat or a cosmic prankster enjoying a cruel joke at the expense of the human race. To turn away from Him would have been so easy. Only with hindsight, did I understand that I was being preserved in the faith by His wonderful grace. If left to my human strength I would have completely renounced Jesus.

Beyond depression, (which was awful in itself) my main emotion at that time was one of irritation toward God and his promises, which to my mind never seemed to be fulfilled. Above all, I was intensely angered at what seemed an unbridgeable gulf between what scripture promised in the way of abundant life in John 10:10, what was happening to me every day. For me, God's Word had lost its credibility. At more than one point I almost lost my faith as I gradually discovered the hard way, that when God seems absent, doubts fly in. Yet, unlike others going through this experience, I did not waste a huge amount of time blaming myself. Personal guilt was not a serious problem; instead I was too busy blaming God for my own plight. I felt in some way that he was responsible and also that he had 'let me down' by allowing me to go through this unbearable situation. However, this was where the trouble lay, for there was too much of 'me' and not enough of Christ. A morbid and selfish preoccupation with my own grievances had caused me to completely overlook the work God was doing in my life. Very slowly and very painfully, he was teaching me patience. Even more seriously, I had completely forgotten that, as the man Jesus Christ, God himself had gone through the agonies of desertion and loneliness, especially on the cross where, in fulfilment of Psalm 22:1 he had cried out 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' That cry of dereliction marked Christ's supreme point of identification with suffering humanity. In Jesus, we have someone who can readily sympathise with our plight. Hebrews 4:15 confirms that Christ, "was in all points tempted like as we are."

Another lesson learnt throughout that bitter time was that under God's hand suffering brings to the surface all our wrong habits, mistaken thoughts and selfish feelings. It provides an opportunity to sort out our priorities and to face up to reality. Also, we begin to discover that we are more sympathetic to other people, better able to help them in their trials and more compassionate in our understanding. It is as if such times of desolation are designed to increase our love.

Another thing, which I began to grasp, was the need to remain doggedly determined to persevere in the Christian life, even when the going was dreadfully hard. Whilst not denying that there is great joy in knowing Jesus, the Christian life is not a carefree walk through a rose garden. On many occasions, it is a long, hard trudge through the wilderness, where any spiritual illumination is constantly elusive - like a mirage on a far off desert horizon. I also discovered - again the hard way - how weak my perception of spiritual things was. I had readily allowed my mind to become warped and embittered by the temptation to despair. Only later did I learn the lesson that though we do not feel that God is present, he nonetheless

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<sup>2</sup> It reads, "But if anyone provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel."

continues to be present in our lives. As scripture teaches in Psalm 139 the divine presence is inescapable, but it's often invisible to our mortal eyes. So, in reality, the seeming absence of God is caused more by our own faulty perception of God's existence. In fact, to deny a divine presence at such periods of darkness, is akin to a blind man denying the existence of the table he keeps crashing into on the grounds he cannot see it. Even I, at my most faithless, kept on blaming a God whom I also accused of not existing! Such is the deceitfulness of sin.

By writing about the absence of God I wish I could advocate a glib formula, which says, 'do a, b and c and then everything will be all right.' Would that it were so easy! The remedy for the perceived absence of God varies from person to person, because we are all individuals with our own unique problems. Instead, some broad recommendations can be offered which may prove of sound, practical use.

My first recommendation is, (if possible) to remain in good, devout company and to allow others to minister to you. Also, do not spend too much time alone, or, if one is forced by circumstances to be alone, keep yourself busy in whatever interests you, even if it is just listening to the radio on a bed of sickness. Above all, do not brood by giving time for self-pity, for self-pity is the worst thing, it eats away at one from inside! If allowed time and space it leads only to misery. Try as far as possible to follow a structured routine and take care only to live one day at a time. As our Lord instructed in Matthew 6:34: "Therefore take no thought [worry] for [about] the morrow; for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

However, do persevere in spiritual things, even if your own personal prayers dry up. Make a point of attending the celebration of Communion, and be willing to receive wise pastoral aid, which could provide the opportunity to unburden yourself. If, like me, you're tempted to dismiss Christianity as nothing more than wishful thinking, please remember that it is based upon a great deal of sound historical evidence, especially in relation to the resurrection of Christ. Indeed, the total objectivity of that event, as crystallised in the words 'He is risen' should meet all doubts head-on and show that we, as Christians, are called to believe in divinely revealed fact not fantasy. Also, it is advisable to draw upon the promises of scripture, to meditate, absorb and take comfort from them. Here, I found Psalms 30, 77, 107, 116 and 118, as well as 1 Corinthians 10:13, James 1:1-15 and 1 Peter 1:3-9 particularly useful. In the end, however long it may seem, no suffering in the world lasts for ever: in His own time, God will provide some form of release, whilst giving us the strength to go on. Defeat and failure are never the last words in the Christian life. As Psalm 30:5 promises 'for his anger endures but a moment, in his favour is life. Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.'<sup>3</sup> These hopeful words anticipate the promise Saint Paul made in 1 Corinthians 10:13, "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it."

As for myself, I am still unemployed, but now I firmly know that the Lord is present with me. Faith has been restored and, relying upon divine strength, I hope to continue with Christ. As Psalm 116:7 puts it so well 'I was brought low, but he helped me'.

Even when your life has fallen completely apart, it is still possible to know objectively that God is there. His seeming absence had been nothing more than an illusion of an overwrought mind."

### **3.5 The Presence of God**

A period of serious tribulation (where God seems totally absent) is only made bearable by holding onto a clear vision of what Jesus is doing through it. Working for our good, he is present in a very deep and loving way. It is the nature of this abiding presence, which will now be explored.

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<sup>3</sup> The writer's House Group Leader shared this passage in April 1984 following a period of prayer. It turned out to be very apt.

From God's viewpoint, tribulation is the opportunity whereby a spiritual hunger is created. It applies to both Christian and non-Christian alike. Regarding the former God wants tribulation to foster an increased devotion to Him so that the Christian's usefulness in the world is increased. With the latter, he wishes unbelievers to find him for the first time in order to lift them out of the Kingdom of darkness. As a result of tribulation, we end up longing for God to do something positive in our lives; and this He will do, but in his own way and time. Our Lord will not be rushed by our impatience. During his earthly ministry even Jesus '*tarry'd*' before travelling further on to help someone.<sup>4</sup> It is important to remember that when the Lord gives assistance it is always on His terms and not ours. In adopting this '*waiting until the last minute before helping*' policy, God is not being mean or unfair; rather He is developing our patience.

A further important trait, which God wishes to strengthen, is '*faith*.' Take the patriarch Job who lost everything. Amidst excruciating physical and mental agony he still managed to cry out '*I know that my Redeemer liveth*' (Job 19:25). Here was a man of the Old Testament who had no knowledge of the blessings of Calvary and yet in faith, he clung to God. Even today, there are persecuted Christians who display such fortitude when they are unjustly imprisoned. Perhaps there is nothing like adversity to reveal our spiritual state, for in conditions of extremity all masks and pretences fall away. God uses suffering as a surgeon does a scalpel, cutting and revealing what is inside us - exposing both healthy and unhealthy tissues. He then applies '*the healing touch of Jesus*,' which deals with our sin and allows new growth to take place. We are acutely aware that we can no longer run away from the reality of our fallen human nature. Our life is now inextricably bound up with Christ. Undeniably, God can do a profound work in those who suffer greatly. He sends His Holy Spirit to point us back to Jesus and to quietly minister to the deepest areas of our personality. It is only through the operation of this Spirit that our faith in Christ is preserved. Our '*natural*' human inclination is always to turn away from Him in either self-righteous anger or cold indifference.

With our own evildoing confronted by God's brusque, no-nonsense manner, the tendency of insisting on our own way is checked. Because of our sense of acute weakness and failure, we are compelled to turn to God who alone can help us. Having come to this place we can then find his will for our lives. We learn that the safest place is the place where Jesus wants us to be (even if such a place seems far from pleasant). We are thus encouraged in obedience. Enduring a hard time can show us what is real in life because our own priorities receive a major battering. Through tribulation we come to recognise that many of our most cherished ideals are nothing more than phantom '*whil o' the wisps*' which delude and deceive us.<sup>5</sup>

Here, it's worth digressing to say that sometimes we do need to be severely disillusioned precisely because we entertain so many far-fetched illusions. Amidst affliction, God strips away false hopes, inordinate affections, misguided wishful thinking, selfish ambition and unrealistic expectations. He roots out such sins in order to create space for Jesus to reign unhindered. Like a skin graft, infected tissue (sin) is removed so that healthy tissue can be grafted on in its place. Tribulation also acts as a means of bringing us into a much-needed sense of reality. Through disappointment the Holy Spirit cures us of our delusions. Under the hammer blows of adversity, we come to understand that **THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN LIFE IS TO FIND GOD AND THEN FOLLOW HIM EVERY STEP OF THE WAY UNTIL SUCH TIME AS HE IS PLEASED TO TAKE US TO HIMSELF.**

The overall effect of any major trial is to batter down our pride and to replace it with humility. We learn to be humbly submissive to our Creator. Furthermore, we can imbibe the lesson that, "*my grace is sufficient for thee; for my strength is made perfect in weakness*," (2 Corinthians 12:9b).

As our tribulation continues we are being dragged through the process of repentance. We need '*self*' to be ousted from the throne of our lives and Christ to be at the centre. Once this process of repentance has been experienced, God's peace can begin to be enjoyed. It is

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<sup>4</sup> Intriguingly, Jesus '*tarry'd*' two days before performing one of his greatest of miracles, the raising of Lazarus, (John 11:6).

<sup>5</sup> One of these ideals (common in Pentecostal circles) is the false hope that Christ's return would be preceded by a glorious '*end time*' revival with Churches uniting to take the nations for God and to create a New World Order. Suffering can provide an opportunity to correct delusions such as these.

discovered that a QUIET CONSCIENCE ACTUALLY RELIEVES SUFFERING. Our trials are a little easier to endure because we are fighting on only one front instead of two. Our inner self is quieted and we can give our full attention to the adverse circumstances alone. In retrospect, it could well have been this quietness of conscience, which enabled the early Christians to endure the harsh vicissitudes of persecution. To receive this peace of mind, we need to ensure that all known sins have been confessed and removed. This wonderful blessing (peace of mind) happens when tribulation drives us to confessional prayer and gives us the opportunity to drop any wrong attitudes or personal sins from our lives.

Tribulation can be likened to the punishment meted out by a Victorian schoolmaster wishing to cure any misdemeanour with the stroke of a cane. We are instructed spiritually through the lean times we endure. One of the lessons we become acutely aware of is that all is not well with the world. The fact that humanity suffers so much acts as an alarm bell, tolling out the need for salvation. A foretaste is given of Hell itself, where painful anguish will continue forever and ever. An illustration of what that ghastly place will be like has been provided by the German concentration camp system during the last world war (1939-1945). For the Church, the presence of suffering provides a further stimulant to evangelism, as Christians are given an intense desire to be used by God to rescue people from their own sin. Like Saul on the Damascus Road Christians discover that it is impossible to fight against divine discipline, no matter how unpleasant it may be (Acts 9:1-9).

At a more mundane level, one particularly valuable lesson which tribulation teaches is perseverance. The choice is presented '*Go on or perish*', and as people in most cases have a fairly well developed survival instinct they usually go on. Like the apostles, Christians need to learn patient endurance in the face of insults and trouble. They can do this only by trusting in the Holy Spirit's power. Also, as this power is provided a marvellous fact is revealed; SUFFERING NEED NOT CURTAIL OUR DISCIPLESHIP, JOY IN THE MIDST OF IT IS POSSIBLE. Even when the Lord seems far away, he still gives his people the strength to endure.

A further blessing comes when tribulation is used to extend the practical ministries given to individual Christians and their churches. Somehow, through a providential ordering of circumstances we are brought into contact with the right people whom the Lord wants us to help. In the Book of Acts, this happened time and time again. (One prominent case being the Thyatiran jailor mentioned in Acts 16:22-34). Such apparently '*chance*' encounters may become the setting for the conversion of the person whom we've just met. Hence tribulation can be used as a means of bringing further expansion to the Kingdom of God. Also, at times some Christians are forced to change geographical location, enabling the Gospel to be brought into completely new areas. Another factor coming into play here is how the dreadful intensity of any suffering can teach Christians to remain open to the Holy Spirit. This means that they keep on speaking those things, which God tells them to speak, and doing those things, which God wants them to do. During a period of affliction Christians simply cannot afford to mess around '*doing their own thing*.' Their lives need constantly to be '*in tune*' with God.

One by-product of tribulation is that it forces believers in Jesus to take spiritual warfare seriously (Ephesians 6:10-19). Abandoned is any careless casual attitude toward the '*enemy of souls*,' for under his assaults we begin to discern what a foul being he is. No longer picturing him as a figure of fun, we have received a powerful inoculation against the seductive temptations of Satan. We realise that when he urges us to do something, it is only for our destruction. On a more positive note, God's tender care is thrown into sharp relief. We see how good it is to take shelter in the Most High, for as Proverbs 18:10 states, '*the name of the Lord is a strong tower: the righteous run into it and are safe.*'

Through suffering God works for his own glory as well as for our edification. To go deep into Christianity is to be broken. Yet '*God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty*' (1 Corinthians 1:27) and what could be weaker than much of the

Church today?<sup>6</sup> God also glorifies himself by putting many of His attributes out on display during tribulation. His justice is revealed when he uses suffering to remove or punish evil and His love is publicised when he causes Christians to care for those who have been thrown into the depths of adversity. Above all, God glorifies himself by showing us more of his Son the Lord Jesus Christ. When, under the Holy Spirit's grace, we turn to Jesus, we see facets of his personality that we'd never even dreamt of before. Inevitably, as new things are learnt about him, we grow in spiritual effectiveness. Tribulation is indeed the soil from which fruitfulness of character emerges. As people we become more holy – that is pure and separate from all forms of evil. All this happens because during tribulation, the Lord is there working in our lives. Gradually, the reality of his presence offsets the terrors of his imagined absence and we are drawn deeper into that circle of love, which exists, between God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Suffering goads us into deeper fellowship with the Trinity, (which now, is no longer viewed as an abstract theological concept).

Even when we bitterly criticise God, we may in a strange sort of way, display a faith in Him. This is brought out in the following meditation, written on Sunday, 18<sup>th</sup> September 2005 two days after some disappointing news over a house move.<sup>7</sup> Its main theme is the presence of faith in times of great doubt and darkness.

### ***Do Nothing God***

*I am a follower of a do nothing God;  
A God who doesn't act to save,  
A God who doesn't keep His Word,  
A God who doesn't implement His justice,  
A God who doesn't respond to prayer,  
A God who doesn't seem to care,  
I am a follower of a do nothing God;  
Who has stretched my faith to breaking point and  
Who has crushed my heart with grief  
God my Father, the Almighty One of Israel,  
The Saviour of broken-hearted Saints,  
Rouse yourself, show your power and  
Do something, anything to redeem  
The awful situation my family and I are in.  
Please quickly answer this prayer  
For the sake of your Son  
The Lord Jesus Christ, Amen*

If nothing else, this meditation confirms that following Christ can be an extremely 'gut wrenching' process in which adversity brings us to confront our feelings of helpless despair. As the Book of Psalms repeatedly demonstrates, part of our faith involves being honest about any negative emotions such as anger, impatience or fear. They are times when it's appropriate to pour out any complaints we feel we have toward our maker. Such honesty is a necessary precondition for spiritual growth because it prevents the build up of an unhealthy bitterness. Negative emotions are given over to the Lord and not bottled up inside. As believers, we are called to face the tough reality of suffering in a fallen world deeply opposed to the purposes of God. True followers of Christ are not called to flee to some romantic dreamland, which airily floats above life's all too real problems. Instead, they are to rely upon divine grace to address these problems in a way, which honours God and helps other people.

Having looked at the work God does in tribulation, it is clear that two main choices are open to us. Do we allow suffering to make us better or bitter – to move us nearer to God or further way from him? If the latter applies then our suffering is truly nihilistic (destructive) and to no

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<sup>6</sup> This observation is far truer in August 2005 than when it was first made just over twenty-one years ago. The revival, which many still hoped for in the 1980s never happened, it just turned out to be a delusion.

<sup>7</sup> Eventually we did move on Friday, 20<sup>th</sup> January 2006. Such a move had become necessary because of the serious threat of violence at our previous address from a gang of drug pushers. The period of July-early October 2005 were among the most terrifying of my life. I didn't know from one day to the other whether myself or my family would come through it unscathed. But praise God! He brought us through.

purpose, we end up being an emotional drain on ourselves as well as on other people. However, if, we allow an ordeal to draw us nearer to God then eventually many blessings will follow. So periods of affliction present both a temptation and an opportunity. We grasp that *'when times are hard, we need to choose faith, not fear'*. However, to increase this faith it is wise to draw comfort from the fact that our Lord Jesus knew what it was like to feel utterly abandoned and forsaken: did he not (in Matthew 27:46) cry out on the cross *'My God, My God why have you forsaken me?'* He too endured the humiliation of separation from divine blessing, the vicious scorn of other people and the very depths of physical pain and paralysis. Yet remembering his Heavenly Father's promises, he trusted in him to bring about the necessary restoration. Throughout His crucified agony, a vision of a glorious future to come helped sustain him so that he died a death, which can serve as a model of patience for all believers to imitate in their less severe trials. Many Christians today, in the power of the Holy Spirit, can still follow Christ's example in tribulation.

At this point a cynic might retort *'Easier said than done. Its just a load of airy fairy nonsense.'* Possibly the last person we feel like imitating when going through a bad time is Jesus because, from our warped perspective, He seems to be the author of our troubles. Such feelings show that unbelief is welling-up in our hearts. Rather than trying to repress these feelings it is better to be open and honest with God and admit that they exist, (1 John 1:7-9). Only then can the Holy Spirit cleanse them. Also, during tribulation great difficulty often lies in controlling our own passions. Thankfully, with the Holy Spirit within us we have the option of pouring out all of our negative emotions (including any desire for vengeance) to God in prayer. This was the course of action followed by the author of Psalm 94. It was also a course of action recommended by the Apostle Paul in Romans 12:19. Here, he drew upon Leviticus 19:18a and Deuteronomy 32:35a to warn, *"avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath; for it is written, 'vengeance is mine; I will repay says the Lord.'"* With God we can be real about how we feel, we can honestly express our most negative feelings to him through our priestly mediator the Lord Jesus Christ, (1 Timothy 2:5). If you feel like smashing the children of your enemies *"against the stones"* (Psalm 137:9c) inform God that that is exactly how you feel. Don't bottle it up! As imprecatory<sup>8</sup> psalms like Psalms 94 and 137 demonstrate honesty with God plays a vital part in promoting both spiritual and psychological growth. By being honest about any vengeful feelings we are giving the Holy Spirit an opportunity to deal with them.

However, to avoid lapsing into endless *'pity parties'* we need to be aware of the danger of so wallowing so much in our emotions that our personal feelings become more important than our relationship with God. Emotional unburdening may be necessary for therapeutic purposes but it should not continue indefinitely. Even a righteous man like Samuel had to be told to stop mourning for Saul, (1 Samuel 16:1). The Lord does set firm time limits on our grief. Usually, sooner rather than later, we need to get back to following Jesus in our daily life. Significantly, with a man who'd just lost his father, Jesus refused to accept bereavement as an excuse for not following Him, (Matthew 8:18-22 & Luke 9:57f). In Luke 9:62, our Lord actually implied that this man was unfit for the Kingdom of God! His own feelings of grief had become an idol. Part of Christian maturity involves learning to establish a (not always easy to find) balance between the need to avoid bottling up negative emotions and the equally important need to avoid wallowing in them to such an extent that normal life becomes impossible. Great wisdom is often required to find just where such a balance lies. The Holy Spirit's guidance (which may come through third parties) is sometimes needed.

Nevertheless, the importance of getting any grief out of the human system cannot be overstressed. This is because suppressed grief can do strange things to a person. It is productive of many physical as well as psychiatric disorders. By no means should we always try to follow the British *'stiff upper lip'* attitude. Quite the contrary! In Ecclesiastes 3:4, Scripture explicitly states that *'there is a time to weep...and a time to mourn'* and in biblical times, mourning was often a very noisy affair! One cannot stress enough that it is perfectly normal and spiritual to grieve. We are called to be Christians, not stoics. Far better is the practice, repeatedly followed in God's word, of first pouring out our grief (and any associated

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<sup>8</sup> These are Psalms, which vehemently curse those evildoers who would oppose God's purposes and persecute his people.

negative feelings like hate) and then turning to the Lord in an attitude of trust for healing. Always, in the area of emotions, the negative has to be cleared out before the positive can be implanted. Until grief (and all of its allied feelings) has been poured out, we may actually need to refrain from praying for a while. Instead, we should be quietly still in the peace of our Lord's presence or get on with little practical things that we can cope with. This alone can bring some measure of healing. Overall, the effect of tribulation should be to teach us that the presence of God is inescapable, no matter what our own feelings tell us. As the author of Psalm 139:7 challenges, *'Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?'* The answer is nowhere, not even when our own existence on Earth has become like Hell itself. God's presence is still there to sustain us, whether or not we are aware of it.

### **3.6 Summary**

**1)** In any discussion about tribulation, humility is needed because: -

**1.1** No one sees all that is going on, many spiritual as well natural causes may be in operation.

**1.2** Suffering is very personal; being total in scope it affects the whole man, body soul and spirit.

**2)** God never allows his people to be tempted beyond their ability without providing either a way of escape or the strength to endure it.

**3)** During tribulation there is a tendency to be dominated by our often negative and hurtful emotions, which can adversely affect our relationships with other people. Psychologically, these emotions make us: -

**3.1** Feel victimised

**3.2** Long for death

**3.3** Regret our birth

**3.4** Feel haunted by past memories

**3.5** Brood over our past sins

**3.6** Ask many questions

**3.7** Loathe both life and ourselves in general

**3.8** Feel unable to concentrate on the positive

**3.9** Be at a loss for words

**3.10** Sink into self-pity

**3.11** Contemplate suicide

**3.12** Become obsessive

**3.13** Slip into escapism

**3.14** Feel intellectually confused

**3.15** Feel let down

**3.16** Desire revenge

**3.17** Actively wish to hurt others

**3.18** Envy the wicked

**3.19** Blame **God**

**4)** Tribulation is greatly worsened if God seems absent. We are tempted to view Him as being: -

**4.1** A wrathful Jehovah

**4.2** A neglectful landlord

**4.3** An ineffectual weakling

**5)** During His seeming absence of God we also find that: -

**5.1** Resentment toward Him builds up

**5.2** One's prayer life becomes dry or non-existent

**5.3** Scriptural promises seem unreal

**5.4** We feel overwhelmed by His wrath

**5.5** We feel betrayed by His neglect

**5.6** We feel that Jesus is not to be trusted

**5.7** Our questions go unanswered

**5.8** We begin to fall into unbelief

- 5.9 We feel that we're on the brink of Hell itself
- 5.10 Satan launches an all out attack
- 5.11 We feel profoundly irritated
- 5.12 Religious services become a dreary ritual
- 5.13 Christian company loses its attraction
- 5.14 Boredom enters ones spiritual life
- 5.15 Spiritual enlightenment eludes us

6) In reality, this seeming absence of God is an illusion. Even if we do not feel it, he is present to: -

- 6.1 Stir up spiritual hunger
- 6.2 Develop our patience
- 6.3 Strengthen our faith
- 6.4 Deal with our sin
- 6.5 Shatter any personally held delusions
- 6.6 Make us face reality
- 6.7 Counter self-will and personal selfishness
- 6.8 Enable us to seek the Holy Spirits wisdom
- 6.9 Help us sort out our priorities
- 6.10 Encourage repentance
- 6.11 Bring peace of mind
- 6.12 Stimulate prayer
- 6.13 Point out the need for salvation
- 6.14 Provide a foretaste of Hell
- 6.15 Foster evangelism
- 6.16 Heighten our discipleship
- 6.17 Extend our ministry
- 6.18 Give growth to the Church
- 6.19 Encourage openness to his Holy Spirit
- 6.20 Help us take spiritual warfare seriously
- 6.21 Glorify Himself
- 6.22 Display His attributes
- 6.23 Nurture personal holiness
- 6.24 Preserve the faith of His people
- 6.25 Draw us deeper into His love
- 6.26 Offer us a choice between being faithful or unfaithful to God
- 6.27 Gives us the grace to endure, even unto death

7) Tribulation can either make us *'better'* or *'bitter,'* depending upon whether we allow it to move us nearer to God.

8) With regard to human passions we should: -

- 8.1 Avoid bottling them up
- 8.2 Release them in prayer
- 8.3 Be still and enjoy God's healing presence
- 8.4 Refrain from endless grief or self-pity
- 8.5 Accept the impossibility of escaping from God's presence