

## On Affliction

*Because suffering is unpleasant, most people consider it to be one of the evils of the world. Some even reject God because they don't understand how a loving Deity can allow so many afflictions. Let us see how the Orthodox Church answers the following questions: What causes suffering? Is it really an evil? Why does God allow it?*

God placed Adam in Paradise. In that wonderful place of joy the first man was unspeakably happy because he was close to God. **Happiness is being with God**, and away from Him there is no true or lasting joy. In the Kingdom of God where God Himself will rule, there will be no sorrow. God will wipe away every tear from the eye. Adam was happy in Paradise as long as he had an inner connection with God through grace. But where did sorrows come from?—from sin. As soon as Adam sinned, he began to suffer, even though he was still in Paradise. Sin carries its own punishment in itself. . . . God had created him [Adam] for joy, but **he chose suffering for himself**.<sup>1</sup>

God is the source of joy, and the devil—the source of suffering. That is why even the sorrows which come to us in this temporary life according to God's will, if they are endured with faith and trust in God's good providence, carry in themselves joy and lead to heavenly glory.<sup>2</sup>

Rejoice and be glad, because **sorrows are a fiery furnace** in which gold is purified. Suffering is the hammer in the hand of the sculptor which makes the statue even more beautiful. Sufferings are those thorny and frightening paths which lead to sunny peaks and paradisiacal views. Rejoice and be glad! Jesus Christ Himself sanctified the road of suffering with His feet. Rejoice and be glad! *For unto you it is given in behalf of Christ, not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for His sake* (Phil. 1:29), The Word of God calls suffering a gift. It is the distinction of the chosen ones of God. It is a medal of honor for the beloved of Christ.<sup>3</sup>

The man who lives in virtue will find that day by day his afflictions increase, and the more he makes progress, the more he will be found amid adversities. And this, indeed, is the sign of the trueness of a man's course: that he lives a bitter life in this world and that he departs from this body

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<sup>1</sup> From *The Meaning of Suffering* by Archimandrite Seraphim Aleksiev.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

with suffering. For this world is not the world of the righteous, and the righteous cannot dwell in it without sorrows.<sup>4</sup>

St. Seraphim of Sarov told one of those people who was spiritually close to him: "My joy! God has prepared for us such glory and bliss in heaven that if this whole room were filled with worms, and they were eating our bodies and we were rotting alive, even then we should have endured all these torments with joy because of the Kingdom of Heaven." All the saints have endured in this way with faith and hope in God's good providence. They were not scared by the temporary hardships which brought them closer to God, but were afraid only of sin, which tears the soul away from grace and happiness to throw it into the abyss of eternal suffering.<sup>5</sup>

*Bishop Theofan the Recluse gives us an instructive tale which vividly illustrates the truth that the sufferings which are endured without complaining on earth free the sinful soul from eternal torments in the world to come:*

A certain man was ill for years and endured everything courageously; but when his body began to rot, he could not stand the great pain and the terrible stench and cried, "Lord! I cannot endure any more! Take my soul!" An Angel of the Lord appeared to him and said, "God has heard your prayer. But since, according to His just judgment, you have one more year left to suffer on earth in order to be completely cleansed from your sins, He will let you choose either to suffer in sickness for one more year on earth, or for your soul to be taken to hell for three hours only." The sick man thought: "A whole year of suffering on this bed! This is unbearable! No, it is better to be in hell for three hours." So the Angel took his soul, locked it in hell, and left it there.

With the departure of the Angel, the last light disappeared from that terrible place of anguish. The ill man heard only the hopeless wailing of the sinners being tormented in the eternal fire<sup>6</sup> and saw the mean faces of the demons flashing before him; and, as he felt lonely and abandoned by all, he began to call desperately, but only the deaf echo of the hellish abyss answered his cries. No one came to help him, because there all sinners [think only of themselves and] are preoccupied with their own sorrows. Thus this poor man himself began to suffer intolerably. The minutes passed like hours, the hours like days, and the days like years. It seemed to him that he

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<sup>4</sup> From *The Ascetical Homilies of St. Isaac the Syrian*, HTM, p.278.

<sup>5</sup> From *The Meaning of Suffering*.

<sup>6</sup> These are those who hate God and thus are burned by His love.

had been suffering for ages in the dungeon of hell, and he despaired that he would ever be rescued from that place of torment. Finally, he began to groan and cry with all his strength.

At last a quiet light shone above him, and the Angel appeared. "How is it for you here, brother?" he asked.

The man could barely answer through his agony, "I did not think that an Angel would lie to me."

"How is that?" asked the Angel.

The man continued, "You promised me that you would take me away from here after only three hours, and whole ages have passed in these torments."

"Ages?" answered the Angel with a quiet smile. "Only one hour has passed, and you have to stay here for two more."

"Two more hours?" cried the man fearfully. "Only one hour has passed? Oh, I cannot endure this any longer! I have no strength left. If there is God's mercy for me, please take me away from here! It is better for me to suffer for years and centuries on earth. I am even ready to suffer there until the Second Coming, just take me out of here!"

Then the Angel said, "It is good that God let you suffer in hell, so that you could see from what suffering He, in His love, seeks to save you with your temporal pains, so that, as you come to know this, you will not grumble in your sufferings."

At these words the man opened his eyes, having awoken in his body after an hour of unconsciousness; and from that day on, he began to endure with pleasure his grave illness, which now seemed to him insignificant and light in comparison to the torments in hell.<sup>7</sup>

If God sends you trials and punishments, do not grieve inconsolably, but rejoice that you are a son of His, that He cares for your salvation. Grieve a little; this is not a sin. But grieve with faith. Shed tears, but not inconsolably. Pour out your sorrow before the Lord, but do not grumble. *Cast thy care upon the Lord, and He will nourish thee* (Ps. 54:25). . . . Through your suffering God is healing you and preparing you for future glory.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *The Meaning of Suffering.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

There is not one saint who has not walked the road of suffering until he was saved. St. John Chrysostom says: "Let us not consider it a sign that God has abandoned us and has despised us, when we are subject to trials, but let it be a sign to us that the Lord cares for us, because, by allowing the trials to come, He is cleansing our sins." . . . **The deeper the sorrow, the closer God is;** the darker the night, the brighter the stars. . . . All sorrowful and humble people are God's beloved. Will God abandon them? No. He will not abandon them either in this world or in the one to come. . . . *For he hath set his hope on Me and I will deliver him; I will shelter him because he hath known My name. He shall cry unto Me, and I will hearken unto him. I will be with him in affliction, and I will rescue him and glorify him* (Ps. 90:14-15).<sup>9</sup>

Not complaining, but patience in suffering—this is what God wants from us. . . . **There are no greater teachers of patience than sorrows.** This is precisely why God sends us suffering; so that we will humble ourselves before Him. . . . The doors of the Kingdom of heaven are too low and narrow for the proud to enter through them; only those humbled by the sufferings of life can go through them freely.<sup>10</sup>

Every adversity and affliction, if not accompanied by patience, produces double torment; for a man's patience casts off his distress, while faintness of heart is the mother of anguish. **Patience is the mother of consolation** and is a certain strength which is usually born of largeness of heart. It is hard for a man to find this strength in his tribulations without a gift from God, received through his ardent pursuit of prayer and the outpouring of his tears.<sup>11</sup>

For in proportion to your humility you are given patience in your woes; and in proportion to your patience the burden of your afflictions is made lighter, and you will find consolation; in proportion to your consolation, your love of God increases; and in proportion to your love, your joy in the Holy Spirit is magnified. Once men have truly become His sons, our tenderly compassionate Father does not take away their temptations from them . . . , but instead He gives His sons patience in their trials. All these good things are given into the hand of their patience for the perfecting of their souls. May Christ God deem us worthy by His grace with a thankful heart to be patient in evils for His love's sake. Amen.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> St. Isaac, p. 211.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.212.