

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

When Saul, who was renamed Paul, was being called God used the disciple Ananias of Damascus (a city in Syria) to anoint him¹. Being suspicious of Saul's motives and mission, Ananias questioned God and was told that he was to be a "chosen vessel" to the gentiles. But Saul's service to God came with a heavy price:

ACTS 9:16 "For I [God] will show him [Paul] **how many things he must suffer** for My name's sake."

The fulfillment of his suffering was truly something that most cannot imagine:

2 CORINTHIANS 11:23-28 ... I [Paul] am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in **deaths often**. 24 From the Jews five times I received forty *stripes* minus one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; 26 *in* journeys often, *in* perils of waters, *in* perils of robbers, *in* perils of *my own* countrymen, *in* perils of the Gentiles, *in* perils in the city, *in* perils in the wilderness, *in* perils in the sea, ***in perils among false brethren***; 27 in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness— 28 besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the *ekklesia*.

It is telling that Paul was killed at *least* four times before he his final death! Paul experienced more afflictions than any of the other apostles so he understood the cost of being a disciple. Even *before* many of these afflictions actually occurred, Paul said that ALL who would be disciples of Christ must suffer afflictions:

ACTS 14:22 [Paul and Barnabas were] strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting *them* to continue in the faith, and saying, "**We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.**"

Tribulation means affliction, anguish, persecution, trouble, or burdens. It is, perhaps, the one word in English that can describe and encompass all the various sufferings that come upon the children of God. But there is one affliction that stands above all others, especially as the end of the age approaches, and Paul experienced it himself. Among other dangers, he was "***in perils among false brethren***" (1 Cor. 15:26). The greatest threat to eternal life will always been from within the *ekklesia* and things are about to get worse—much worse. Describing the signs of the End of the Age to the disciples, Jesus began by listing some of the world events during the Time of Sorrows:

MATTHEW 24:4-8 And Jesus answered and said to them: "Take heed that no one deceives you. 5 "For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many. 6 "And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not

¹ Acts 9:1-19.

troubled; for all *these things* must come to pass, but **the end is not yet**. 7 “For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. 8 “All these *are* **the beginning of sorrows**.

The Time of Sorrows happens before the Abomination of Desolation (Matt. 24:15) and the Great Tribulation (Matt. 24:21). Why is it called a Time of Sorrows? Perhaps because it is a time of many AFFLICTIONS upon the *ekklesia*:

MATTHEW 24:9-10, 12 “Then they will deliver you up to **tribulation** and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name’s sake. 10 “And then **many [of “you,” referring to the saints] will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another**. ... 12 “And **because lawlessness will abound, the love of many [saints] will grow cold**.

Not only will the *ekklesia* be afflicted by all *nations* but certain so-called brethren will cause many offenses and betray other brethren (the worst of all offenses). Offenses are the RESULT of not having agape love. Surely there can be no greater sorrow than for saints to afflict one another. How does someone handle the afflictions of offenses when they arise from others within the Body of Christ?

1 PETER 2:20-22 For what credit *is it* if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But **when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God**. 21 For to this you were called, because **Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example**, that you should follow His steps: 22 “Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth”;

Peter admonishes the saints to endure the sufferings afflicted upon them just as Jesus Christ. What exactly was the example of Christ the saints are to copy?

ISAIAH 53:7 He [*Jesus Christ*] was oppressed and **He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth**; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so **He opened not His mouth**.

1 PETER 2:-23 ... **when He [*Jesus Christ*] was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously**;

Jesus Christ did not respond in kind when He was afflicted. Who can claim they suffered greater afflictions of offenses than what Christ endured from those He for whom He died? Afflictions of offenses from within the *ekklesia* are hard to bear and cause hurt, anger, hatred, malice, grief, and sadness. Consider for a moment the afflictions of OUR offenses upon our Savior:

ISAIAH 53:3-5 **He [*Jesus Christ*] is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief**. And **we hid**, as it were, *our* faces from Him; **He was despised**, and **we did not esteem Him**. 4 Surely **He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken**, smitten by God, and afflicted. 5 But **He was wounded for our transgressions**, *He was* bruised for our iniquities; **the chastisement for our peace was upon Him**, and by His stripes we are healed.

Read this as if it were the first time. Jesus Christ was utterly rejected by those He came to save. None pitied or consoled Him when He was afflicted. He bore our sins through physical afflictions no one can imagine. In spite of that, He bore OUR grief and OUR sorrow. He was afflicted by OUR offenses. He was 'chastised' so WE can have His peace. What did He say just PRIOR to all our afflictions coming upon Him? "**Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you.**" (John 14:27). His peace truly makes the suffering of afflictions much more bearable especially when we put our own sufferings into *this* perspective:

ROMANS 5:15-16, 20-21 But the free gift [*of grace*] is not like the offense. For if by the one man's offense many died, much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many. 16 And the gift *is* not like *that which came* through the one who sinned. For the judgment *which came* from one offense resulted in condemnation, but **the free gift [*of grace*] which came from many offenses** resulted in justification. ... 20 Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more, 21 so that as sin reigned in death, even so **grace might reign [*instead of death*]** through righteousness **to eternal life** through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The "**many** offenses" against Jesus Christ number in the BILLIONS. How many times can you say that others have offended you? A few dozen? Not only did all these offenses come upon Him, they were all at once and while He was physically suffering on the cross—and then God left Him. Through all that, He is able to give us a peace that surpasses all understanding². I am not making light of the pain of offenses of brethren, but **who has been afflicted and suffered alone like Jesus Christ?** Perhaps this is Paul's thought when he said ours are "**light**" afflictions:

2 CORINTHIANS 4:16-18 Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet **the inward man is being renewed day by day.** 17 For **our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory,** 18 while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen *are* temporary, but the things which are not seen *are* eternal.

Offenses can fill the heart with the rocks of anger, hatred, and malice. Enough 'rocks' and nothing good can take root:

MATTHEW 13:20-21 "But **he who received the seed on stony places [*of his heart*],** this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 21 "yet he has no root in himself, but **endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises** because of the word, **[he is immediately offended].**

While there is a time to attempt to reconcile ALL offenses, suffering the afflictions of offenses from other brethren in silence and without reviling or threatening fulfills the most difficult commandment given to the saints—"love your enemies":

² Phil. 4:6-7.

MATTHEW 5:44 “But I [*Jesus Christ*] say to you, **love your enemies**, **bless** those who curse you, **do good** to those who hate you, and **pray for** those who spitefully use you and persecute you,

1 PETER 3:8-9 Finally, all of you [*saints*] be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, *be tenderhearted, be courteous*; 9 **not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing**, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing.

Not doing or saying harmful things is the way to bless our enemies and do good for them. Praying FOR an enemy is repaid by God with the abundant peace that Jesus Christ has to give. This leads to the greatest reward:

HEBREWS 10:32-33, 35-36 But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated [*called*], **you endured a great struggle with sufferings**: 33 partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and **tribulations [afflictions]**, and partly while **you became companions of those who were so treated**; ... 35 Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. 36 For **you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise [of eternal life]**

The purpose of keeping the Law is to BE like God and **become** “ [*agape*] love out of a pure heart.” (1 Tim. 1:5). Can anyone learn to love an enemy WITHOUT experiencing the afflictions of offenses, especially those from brethren? Perhaps this is exactly what the Psalmist was thinking when he wrote:

PSALMS 119:69-71 The proud have forged a lie against me [*which is an offense*], *but I will keep Your precepts with my whole heart*. 70 Their heart is as fat as grease, *but I delight in Your law*. 71 **It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes**.

The afflictions of offenses from brethren cause many tears. But it is better to shed tears out of love for an enemy than to end up “weeping” in the Lake of Fire because God promises to take care of tears of love:

ISAIAH 25:8-9 He [*the Lord GOD*] will swallow up death forever, and the Lord GOD will **wipe away tears from all faces; the rebuke [shame, reproach, rebuke] of His people He will take away** from all the earth; for the LORD has spoken. 9 And it will be said in that day: “Behold, this *is* our God; **we have waited for Him**, and He will save us. This *is* the LORD; **we have waited for Him**; we will be glad and rejoice in His salvation.”

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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