Christian Suffering - A Biblical Perspective

globalrecordings.net/en/christian-suffering

by A. David Macnaughtan, GRN Australia

Introduction: This booklet had its birth back in 1997-98. I was seeking to share encouragement with some of my fellow members of Global Recordings Network. They represented countries where there was a rising tide of pressure upon Christians. How dramatically the world has changed since then. I am currently revising this booklet as America and its allies have begun to bomb Afghanistan (October 2001).

The purpose of the booklet has gained urgency, not only as a tool of encouragement to Christians under fires of persecution, but also to aid those who still live in relatively un-threatened peace. Most of us in these circumstances are totally unprepared both to sustain our own inward peace and spiritual confidence, should we suddenly become the target of religious hatred. Nor are we biblically equipped to minister meaningful comfort and encouragement to our friends and neighbours in such a situation.

Somehow we need to bring a sense of realism into the way we read familiar Scripture. Picture in your mind a bruised, lacerated, limping Apostle Paul addressing the church in Derbe, Lystra and Iconium just three or four days after being stoned to unconsciousness and apparent death, "encouraging" the believers to remain true to the faith, "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God." (Acts 14:22) These believers themselves were only days or weeks old in the faith. Or imagine Peter and John, with their backs raw with welts from the cruel flogging they had received, "rejoicing" that they were worthy of the 'shame' attached to the name of Christ, as they burst back onto the streets defiantly and fearlessly to preach and teach. Such realism seem totally foreign to our pleasure loving Western Church scene. However, it would not seem out of place in southern Sudan or the Maluccas in Indonesia or in northern Nigeria or upper Eqypt.

This booklet falls into three sections. Firstly there is an overview of what we can expect because we are lovers and followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is followed by Scriptures, which instruct us as to how we should react when we are suffering for Christ. Finally there is the forward look that I trust will strengthen our assurance of final victory and restoration. My prayer is that you will be strengthened and encouraged through reading it. I would also urge you to memorise as many of the quotations as possible. You will then have them to hand whenever you need them. Remember, there will always be someone else in need of the encouragement you have received, so be ready to pass it on!

A. David Macnaughtan

"I Will Show Him How Much He Must Suffer for My Name." Acts 9:16

A message of encouragement to God's suffering believers

It is universally true that no one likes to suffer physical attack, abuse, or persecution. No one enjoys being rejected or hated, especially when it is undeserved. We shudder at the contemplation of being viciously beaten or killed for the sake of Christ. However, if we are to faithfully follow the Lord Jesus we must make some basic choices. One of these is a willingness to share His suffering and His rejection. In the heart of every unbeliever, the Lord Jesus Christ is a rejected King.

Listen to the Lord's own words, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. {19} If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. {20} Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. {21} They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me. {22} If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin. Now, however, they have no excuse for their sin. {23} He who hates me hates my Father as well {24} If I had not done among them what no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. But now they have seen these miracles, and yet they have hated both me and my Father. {25} But this is to fulfill what is written in their Law: They hated me without reason.'" "{1} All this I have told you so that you will not go astray. {2} They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God {3} They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me" (John 15:18- 16:3).

There is nothing about Christian suffering that is not already known to our blessed Saviour. The Lord Jesus has been there before us. In fact, from God the Father's viewpoint, though He is not the author of sin and suffering, in His sovereign power He constantly causes pain and trouble to achieve His perfect will. We see this principle at work in the preparation of His Son, our Saviour, to be our perfect High Priest. "But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. {10} 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 2:9-10) "Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted." (Hebrews 2:18) "Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered" (Hebrews 5:8)

Our Saviour's words in (John 15:18 - 16:4) therefore give us an insight into the reasons why Christians suffer persecution. Firstly it is because the hearts of those who reject the Lord Jesus' divine authority are incurably wicked! "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. ('...desperately wicked' AV) Who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9) "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander." (Matthew 15:19) It does not matter how sophisticatedly we may dress up the 'world', un-regenerate, unsaved men and women are still sinners at heart and rebellious against God! Is this not true?

Secondly, the Lord Jesus states that hatred directed toward us is, in reality, hatred toward Himself and ultimately toward His Father, whom the unsaved do not know. The Lord Jesus, as God manifest in the flesh, in whom the fullness of the Godhead dwell, is Lord and King, but that is what fallen mankind rejects and balks at and hates. Each man or woman wants to be king of their own lives and it takes a work of divine grace to enable them to surrender that place of lordship to Jesus Christ.

Thirdly there is the conviction of sin. When Christ exposed His opponents' sin they were left with two alternatives. They could either own their guilt and repent, or they could react with hatred toward Him. This is the life-long conflict between light and darkness. Spiritual darkness hates the Christ who is the Light. "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. {20} Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed." (John 3:19-20) Such hatred is inexcusable and totally unreasonable' (See John 15:25) The Saviour's analysis helps us understand the hostile minds of unsaved people. Their perception of the Lord Jesus, and of us who follow Him, has been totally distorted by the devil. Satan is their master, and therefore they reflect Satan's attitude toward God. "You belong to your father, the devil," Jesus said to those who refused to believe in Him, "and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies." (John 8:44) The Bible also speaks of unsaved people as having minds that are 'darkened' "{4} The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." (2 Corinthians 4:4) This blind, intractable hatred against Christ, which Satan instills in people's minds, will be directed against us as well. Those who persecute Christians do not understand the unseen power that is manipulating and motivating their reactions.

Fourthly, throughout this passage, the Saviour warns His followers not to missunderstand their suffering. "All this I have told you so that you will not go astray. {2} They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God. {3} They will do such things because they have not known the Father or

me." (John 16:1- 3) Later He affirmed, "But a time is coming, and has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me. {33} "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (John 16:32-33)

The Lord went on to describe the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the Teacher, the One called alongside to help, the Counselor, the Spirit sent to represent and be Christ's universal presence. "But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you, but if I go, I will send him to you. {8} When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: {9} in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me, {10} in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer, {11} and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned." (John 16:7-11)

This is the world in which we are called to follow the Master and share His suffering. Whether they recognise it or not, the hearts and minds of the Christ-rejecting world are not only under the control of Satan, but also under the conviction of the Holy Spirit.

A sense of guilt is universal. A person's unwillingness to own his personal guilt before God makes him restless, always searching for a solution, yet unwilling to confess his enmity is ultimately against God the Father and His Son.

We ourselves were at one time part of that pool of rebellion and hatred. But God, in infinite love and grace has chosen us as a people from every generation, to be His own peculiar treasure. "For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, {14} in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:13-14) "As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world " (John 15 19b) (See also Ephesians 1:3-7; and 2:1-10)

Having been chosen by God, with all the benefits of being born again, cleansed, forgiven and with new life through the indwelling Holy Spirit, we are faced with a challenge. The challenge is to declare publicly our allegiance to the rejected Lord Jesus Christ! To love Him, and to let that love be known, leaves us no option but to publicly side with Him, whatever that may cost. In this regard Paul wrote to the Philippians, "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him," (Philippians 1:29) Our public witness in our baptism, and our subsequent obedience and service, are a testimony to our allegiance to Christ While the immediate consequence of our allegiance may bring personal rejection and suffering, there is one perspective that makes such an allegiance so worthwhile. "Now if we are children, then we are heirs-heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. {18} I consider that our present

sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." (Romans 8:17-18)

We are daily faced with the inescapable call, "And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood {13} Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace [reproach] he bore." (Hebrews 13:12-13)

As I wrote at the beginning, our 'natural' person does not like this prospect of rejection any more than did those disciples of our Lord who first faced it. At the first challenge to their allegiance they all forsook the Lord Jesus and fled! But the risen Lord, in His marvellous grace, drew them together again. Later, by the in-pouring of His Spirit into their lives, He reproduced in them the courage He himself found during His agony of prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. From the day of Pentecost onward, 'Suffering for His Name' became the disciples' badge of honour and their joy. A little later we read of Peter and the other apostles who were the first disciples to experience beating for Christ's sake, - "[The apostles] left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. {42} Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ." (Acts 5:41-42) Their suffering became a liberating experience. Notice the 'offensive' message they proclaimed, "...that Jesus is the Christ."

I believe that we must be willing to join these apostles and the vast host of saints and martyrs who down the centuries, have similarly 'rejoiced because they had been counted worthy of suffering for the Name'. Jesus had warned them earlier, "But before all this, they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. {13}This will result in your being witnesses to them. {14} But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. {15} For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict." (Luke 21:12-15)

Understanding Christian Suffering from God's Viewpoint:

"I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. {25} The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. {26} Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me." (John 12:24-26)

(Mark 8:35) "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it."

This is a mystery of gigantic proportions, but a mystery we can begin to understand with the Holy Spirit's aid. It appears, viewed from our human vantage point, that the Lord is indifferent and unperturbed as tens of thousands, even millions of His children are wiped out by hostile foes! It is true, suffering and death in this life, for the Christian, is not the disaster from God's standpoint, which it seems to be from ours! Hear Jesus' words, "I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more..." (Luke 12:4) "I know your afflictions and your poverty--yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. {10} Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life." (Revelation 2:9-10)

Don't misunderstand me - the death of His children is not incidental to God. "Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints." (Psalms 116:15) He is not unmindful, nor unsympathetic. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin. {16} Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." (Hebrews 4:15-16) A Christian's death however, is never the loss or disaster that it appears to be. The Risen Lord lives and operates in the realm beyond death, persecution, torture and all those other horrendous things, which are being done to His children somewhere any hour of any day or night. His perspective is from the realm of eternal triumph. He has Himself tasted death for every man and triumphed. Temporary suffering therefore, for His children, holds no threat, for He see it in the context of ultimate triumph. What appears to us as the grain of wheat falling seemingly lifelessly into the ground, the Lord sees in terms of the harvest His Father has planned!

To begin to understand how God views suffering and martyrdom we need to evaluate such suffering in comparison with the outcome which it will achieve in glory. Paul had been enabled, by the Spirit, to understand this principle, as he records, "Now if we are children, then we are heirs--heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. {18} I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." (Romans 8:17-18) "Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you..." (Colossians 1:24a) "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. {17} For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. {18} So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." (2 Corinthians 4:16-18) The Lord Jesus said, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. {12} Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in

heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Matthew 5:11-12)

We, by faith, can take our stand with the Lord in that pristine atmosphers of heaven, and from there view whatever brief and awful experience we may have to suffer. Now, in God's divine purpose - our suffering becomes miniscule in comparison to the harvest God intends - "great is your reward in heaven." Some of the benefits gained from suffering are apparent right here and now - "Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; {4} perseverance, character; and character, hope. {5} And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us." (Romans 5:3-5) "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, {3} because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. {4} Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." (James 1:2-4) Peter also writes, "And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast." (1 Peter 5:10) However, when our suffering threatens to climax in death, we must look by faith beyond death to see the benefits. Peter had this in mind when he wrote, "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. {7} These have come so that your faith--of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire--may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed." (1 Peter 1:6-7) Faith that has endured while suffering in this life will forms part of the great paean of praise that will rise to Christ's glory when He appears. Let me summarise what we have said in this section:

- From (John 12:22-24) and (Matthew 16:21-26) it is apparent that the Lord sees life as expendable in the cause of the Gospel. In contrast with Christ's view we have the disciple Peter's attitude of self-preservation - "{22} Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"" Jesus responds, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."" (Matthew 16:23)
- In (Mark 8:35) the Lord reinforced this principle. "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it." (Mark 8:35) Our brief sojourn here was given us in order that we might expend it for the sake of God's will in the Gospel.
  It is obvious both from our own hearts and the Saviour's teaching that the natural man has a struggle right at this point.

- In (Luke 9:23) the Saviour uses an unmistakable analogy - the instrument of inescapable expendability - the cross, to illustrate His outlook on this life, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." The same is amplified in (Luke 14:26-27) ""If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters--yes, even his own life--he cannot be my disciple. {27} And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."

God's Handbook on Christian Suffering:

Many years after his first experience of suffering for Christ in (Acts 5:40-41), Peter wrote to the next generation of believers, and to all of us who have followed, his wonderful guidebook on Christian suffering - the book of 1 Peter. I believe the Lord has given us this 'manual' so that we can stand firm when the heat of persecution is on us. He begins by addressing his readers, "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to God's elect (chosen), strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia," (1 Peter 1:1) Notice the remarkable dissimilarity in the terms Peter is inspired to use, "To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered." They had been chosen by the Lord - 'God's elect!' "...who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood." (1 Peter 1:2) To the world however, they were "strangers" - people of no significance, unknown, unvalued. Furthermore, due to persecution, they had been 'scattered' throughout the Roman empire.

Paul, in his introduction to the Ephesian letter, writes similarly, "{3 } Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. {4} For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight." (Ephesians 1:3-4) Though all the world reject us as 'nameless strangers', we can rejoice and rest in God's gracious 'election'! This is a position that can never be altered by other peoples' opinion of us, or by any edict of a human court. Our standing was established by a sovereign act of divine grace before the creation of the world! We are 'chosen in Christ'. Never let go of that truth! By human evanuation however, Peter's readers were, 'strangers in the world'. Not only were they strangers because the world just could not understand the mysterious inward workings of God's grace. They were deliberately rejected and disowned and devalued because of their allegiance to the rejected Son of God. "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. {19} If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you." (John 15:18-19) It is also essential that we accept Christ's words, "...you do not belong to the world."

Should we still entertain a longing for public acceptance, we will fall under the judgement of God's word through John, "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him." (1 John 2:15)

The Believer's Security in Christ:

Peter continues, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, {4} and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade- kept in heaven for you, {5} who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time." (1 Peter 1:3-5) It is one of the wonderful habits of the biblical writers to constantly focus their readers' attention on the ultimate security of our hidden, unassailable, heavenly riches! We constantly need this perspective, for it is this vision which enables us to practise that other inexplicable Christian grace - The power to rejoice in suffering!' "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. {7} These have come so that your faith-of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire - may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed." (1 Peter 1:6-7) Similarly, as so often is the case, Paul expressed the same dramatic contrast, "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, {2} through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God {3} Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance {4} perseverance, character; and character, hope {5} And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us." (Romans 5:1-3) James writes similarly, "Consider [count] it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, {3} because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance." (James 1:2-3) Did you notice that in each case the outcome is the same - suffering produces perseverance and perseverance hope, which is the power - which enables us to rejoice, despite the difficult circumstances!

Love - The Ultimate Motivation:

We return to (1 Peter 1:8-9). "Though you have not seen [the Lord Jesus], you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, {9} for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls." The hidden strength to rejoice through our suffering is in our passionate love for the Lord Jesus, our Great High Priest in heaven, who is ever interceding for us. So sure are we of the ultimate outcome of His ministry of prayer, we can embrace our full salvation by faith and rejoice in it now. Without this personal love for our ascended Lord, suffering for His name has

no strong, motivational power. Love strengthens faith and stimulates "an inexpressible and glorious joy", which has at its heart the confidence of our total salvation. We must therefore carefully guard our love relationship with the Saviour.

The Glory on Ahead:

The ultimate blessing from suffering for the Lord Jesus will be, of course, to share in His eternal glory. The Saviour's own suffering was not unexpected. "From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." (Matthew 16:21) Later, the Risen Christ taught His disciples, "Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory" (Luke 24:26) Because of this future glory, Paul could write, "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. {17} For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. {18} So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." {1} "Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands." (2 Corinthians 4:16- 5:2) In (Romans 8:17-18) Paul wrote, "Now if we are children, then we are heirs-heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. {18} I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." (See Hebrews 12:1-3) Why did the Lord Jesus, Peter and Paul each go to such great lengths in their teaching concerning suffering? It was in order that they might encourage us, their readers, giving us a correct perspective so that we, in turn, may endure our suffering for the glory of God. We must keep our eyes on the glory ahead!

How Then Shall We React When Suffering?

Firstly, as already stated above, we need to understand God the Father's attitude toward suffering. He is a Sovereign God who works all things according to His perfect wisdom and will. He does not see suffering as something evil to avoid. Rather, He harnesses it to become an instrument for our eventual good and His glory. He knows the end from the beginning and can use the evil intentions of persecutors to actually achieve His will and our eventual blessing. Peter states, "For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. {20} But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God" (1 Peter 2:19-20) In contrast to God's commendation, suffering, in the eyes of the world is a thing of 'shame'. Unfortunately, if we lose sight of God's sovereign wise control over suffering, it is possible for us as believers to

begin to view our suffering with the same attitude as the world. That is, we then begin to feel 'ashamed'.

But this need not occur if we remember Peter's encouragement. "{16} However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name." (1 Peter 4:16) Being a disciple of Jesus Christ is never something of which we should be ashamed.

Secondly, there is the human sense of 'fear' which springs up in the heart so naturally at times of suffering. Note our risen Saviour's encouragement to the Church at Smyrna, "Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life." (Revelation 2:10) Peter also writes "But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed, "Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened." (I Peter 3:14)

Thirdly, one of the hardest emotions to handle is the 'surprise' aspect of suffering, especially when being suddenly accused as an evildoer. 'Why should this happen to me?' is our cry. Peter also has an answer to this - "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. {13} But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed." (1 Peter 4:12-13)

Attitudes We Should Be Cultivating Now Before We Suffer:

Peter advocates a number of heart attitudes that are essential for us to develop, if we are to react properly under suffering. Firstly, there is the essential discipline of holy living. "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. {11} Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. {12} Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us." (1 Peter 2:9-12)

The second essential attitude is a humble, surrendered heart, firstly toward the Lord Jesus, and then toward others. "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect." (I Peter 3:15) This was the stance the Saviour exhibited during His life here on earth, and especially during His trial and crucifixion. "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. {22} 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth'" (1 Peter 2:21-22) To

walk humbly with the Lord Jesus in public, when under false accusation as an evil doer, is never a weakness. Rather it is a most empowering testimony to others. "Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble' {6} Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. {7} Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." (1 Peter 5:5-7)

Thirdly, there is the discipline of self-control, which is also a fruit of the Spirit. "{8} Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. {9} Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings." (1 Peter 5:5-9) There is never any occasion in a Christian's life which warrants any other attitude than Christ-like humility and godly self control.

Facing the Ultimate Challenge - To Abandon Christ or Die:

Hundreds of thousands of believers are facing this challenge every year. Where can we find encouragement in Scripture to strengthen our faith and courage? One most helpful Scripture is in Daniel Chapter 3. There Daniel's three friends refused to bow before Nebuchadnezzar's idol. "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, "0 Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. {17} If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, 0 king {18} But even if he does not, we want you to know, 0 king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."" (Daniel 3 16-18) The Lord may, or may not, rescue us when we face a similar challenge to renounce our faith in Christ. What we need is a heart commitment as clear as that possessed by those three Hebrews. They would happily die, but they would never disown God! No suffering here can compare with the glory Christ will bestow on those who remain faithful unto death. May I remind you again of the Risen Saviour's words to the Church at Smyrna, "Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. 1 tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. {11} He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death." (Revelation 2:10-11)

Peter's Closing Word of Encouragement:

"And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. {11} To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen." (1 Peter 5:10-11) Peter brings us back to our 'election' by the Sovereign 'God of all grace'. And to these battered and broken Christians, who were to

receive his letter, Peter portrays the Father as One who takes the broken fragments of a precious vessel and skilfully and lovingly puts them perfectly back together, restoring His treasure to stand strong and steadfast. Our bodies may be beaten and broken or blown apart or cast into the grave, but from there God will call them to an unimaginable transformation - made like Christ's glorious body! This contemplation of the ultimate restoration of God's suffering children draws from Peter a declaration of praise, "{11} To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen."

Finally - The Example of Our Lord Jesus Christ:

Let me point to the most instructive example of all, which comes from the life of our Lord Jesus Himself. His response can also be ours. Time and time again we can choose His response when we find ourselves overwhelmed by the pain and strain of suffering. The incident we are to examine comes immediately after His teaching about a 'grain of wheat falling into the ground.' In (John 12:27-28) Jesus exclaims, "{27} Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour' No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour {28} "Father, glorify your name!" Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again"" Rather than a prayer of self preservation, "Father, save me from this hour." Jesus prayed what I feel is the ultimate prayer of triumph under suffering, "Father, glorify Your name!" It is a prayer that combines all that we have spoken of - submission, and a forward, upward looking faith, confident that God has the situation in His great hands.

There is one other statement we should not miss when considering this difficult topic of suffering for the Lord. While He was under trial before Pilate, the Lord Jesus responds to Pilate's claim to power, "Do you refuse to speak to me?" Pilate said. "Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?" (John 19:10) "Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin." (John 19:11) We look on the trial of our Saviour with great disgust as we see the perversion of justice, but He looked at it as something that had been 'given from above'! Do we believe in the sovereignty of God in all that happens? We may not understand it. We may grieve under the pain of suffering. But it makes a world of difference if we are convinced of divine sovereignty. As disciples of Jesus Christ we do not know how and when we will be persecuted for bearing that blessed 'Name'. When it does overtake us let us not be ashamed or intimidated or fearful - we are in the most blessed company!

"He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering..." (Isaiah 53:3) Rather let us humbly, even joyfully, endure whatever the Father ordains, or allows to touch us, frequently breathing up to Him the Saviour's prayer - "Father, glorify your Name!" May the Lord be glorified as we do so.

Your brother in Christ,

A. David Macnaughtan.

Some further encouraging Scriptures

(Acts 23:11) "The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, 'Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.'"

(2 Timothy 4:17) "But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth."

(Matthew 5:11) "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me."

(Matthew 5:44) "But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

(Romans 8:35,37-39) "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?...{37} No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. {38} For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, {39} neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

(Romans 12:14) "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse."