**Learning Obedience from Suffering**

*by Harry Osborne*

The book of Hebrews shows the correlation between suffering and the learning of obedience. The writer declares that Christ was perfected as the author of salvation through sufferings (Heb. 2:10) and that he "learned obedience by the things which he suffered" (Heb. 5:9). The writer exhorts the readers to follow Jesus' example in chapter twelve. He urges them to be perfected in righteousness as they face growing affliction (Heb. 12:1-13).

While the experience of human suffering is universal, the lessons learned from it are not. Whether young or old, rich or poor, righteous or wicked, all of us experience suffering. The reaction we have to such experiences determines whether or not we learn obedience through the things suffered. The same episode may result in a determination furthering obedience or a discouragement furthering rejection of God's will. The difference in reactions is not brought about by dissimilar events, but by dissimilar hearts.

The Bible is filled with the stories of suffering on the part of people of all ages. We would do well to emulate those who handled adversity properly. The example which stands out above all others is that upon which the Hebrew writer bases his appeal - Jesus.

**Jesus speaks of this agony in his last public discourse recorded in the gospel of John. He says, "Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say, 'Father, save me from this hour?' But for this purpose I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name" (Jn. 12:27-28a). In his incarnation, Jesus was "made in the likeness of men" and "found in fashion as a man" (Phil. 2:6-7). As a man, he did not desire all of the horrors associated with his death on the cross. However, obedience drove him to subject himself to the will of the Father. The essence of his statement is not "Father, save me from this hour," but "Father, glorify your name." His obedience was put to the ultimate test and perfectly met it. Therefore, he becomes our example as we are tempted to forsake the will of God in times of hardship, but persevere in obedience despite the consequences.**

**The Hebrew writer continues this thought in the fifth chapter. Here, he draws upon the image of Jesus at Gethsemane so vividly pictured in the Gospels (Matt. 26:36-44; Mk. 14:32-39; Lk. 22:39-46). All of the accounts paint a clear picture of Jesus suffering intense, mental agony over the events soon to transpire. In the midst of such suffering, he goes to the only source of real help, the Father, in prayer. Matthew's account shows Jesus reaching the same resolution as he did on the previous occasion recorded in John 12. In the first prayer at Gethsemane, Jesus says, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass away from me: nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Matt. 26:39). The emphasis of this first prayer is on his desire to be spared the execrable death on the cross. However, the determination to obey despite the results is seen in the account of the second prayer, "My Father, if this cannot pass away, except I drink it, thy will be done" (Matt. 26:42). Barmby expresses it this way:**

**His human will did not oppose itself to the Divine will: it conformed itself in the end entirely to it; but this according to the necessary conditions of humanity, through the power of prayer. Had it not been so with him, Ins participation in human nature would have been incomplete; he would not have been such as to be "touched with the feelings of our infirmities, being in all points tempted like as we are;" nor would he have stood forth forever as the great Example to mankind (Pulpit Com., Exposition of Heb. 5:7-8, p. 138).**

**The test of true obedience is not found in the execution of desirable tasks, but of dreaded tasks from which one longs for escape. Such a longing existed in Jesus regarding all that accompanied the preparation for and endurance of Calvary, but he submitted to every humiliating and excruciating moment in obedience. Indeed, the whole event demands the conclusion reached by the Hebrew writer, "Though he was a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered" (Heb. 5:8).**

**The thorn in the flesh of the apostle Paul was a teacher of obedience in a sense. Lest he glory in himself as the one through whom God gave great revelations, the affliction served as a reminder that the greatness was in God who gave the words, not Paul, a mere messenger (2 Cor. 12:7-10). The suffering endured was a constant reminder of God’s greatness in comparison to Paul's frailty. When one truly reflects upon the majesty of God and his Word, obedience is induced.**

**The Hebrew writer exhorts the readers not to be "of them that shrink back unto perdition, but of them that have faith unto the saving of the soul" (Heb. 10:39). He then calls to their minds numerous examples of Old Testament characters who obeyed God as faith demands. Each one did so under some sort of trial or hardship. Not only did they learn obedience through the things they suffered, but we are taught by their examples as to the demands of an obedient faith.**

**The book of 2 Timothy is written as Paul experiences various forms of suffering. He suffered from the rejection of his friends and brethren (2 Tim. 1:15; 4:16). He suffered from the fact that false teachers were working with their malignant leaven (2 Tim. 2:16-18). He suffered from the impending apostasy he saw coming upon the cause of Christ (2 Tim. 3:1-9; 4:34). He suffered from evil done to him by others (2 Tim. 4:14). He also suffered from his imprisonment and imminent execution (2 Tim. 4:6). Throughout the book, he urges Timothy to do as he is doing and hold on to sure things. He appeals to the truth of the Gospel and urges uncompromising loyalty to it. The suffering Paul was experiencing brought more clearly into focus that which really mattered. Obedience was both learned and taught.**

**When we experience rejection for standing upon the truth of God, will we compromise the truth or learn obedience? We often talk to teenagers about this pressure, but it works on all of us regardless of age. Business men have succumbed to joining in the use of alcohol and sordid entertainment to escape the ridicule and rejection of or' their associates. I have seen preachers turn their back on the truth and one who was upholding it because of the pressure. Such suffering may even come from family (Matt. 10:34-37). No one is immune from Satan's pull in this area.**

**I have often reflected on the faith of numerous older preachers told to cease preaching the truth during the institutional division. When they obeyed God rather than man, many were thrown out of homes and cut off without a dime to support their families. Most preachers today have not had to suffer that trauma. It would be easy to rationalize our needs as being so great that "small" compromises would be justified. One could say those being fired really were not making a different stand, but just had a "bad approach." Such reasoning and justifying has provided unsound churches with their "preachers." We must watch out lest we repeat this history.**

**As situations in this life bring us sorrow and pain, let us look to the examples of those who endured suffering in faith. The temptation is for us to become so discouraged that service to our Lord is forsaken. Such action would fail to learn the lesson of obedience. We must let the experience of suffering be an occasion to think about that which is solid and secure. Material goods, health, relationships, events and every other part of this life will fail and suffering will result. Each time suffering comes, it provides a chance for us to learn obedience by the things suffered. We must press on unto perfection, laying up treasure in heaven wherein is no more death, mourning, crying or pain - where every tear shall be wiped from our eyes forever and all will be made new. Heaven will be occupied by those who suffer and by such learn obedience.**