



Suffering by Degree

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What I'm about to talk about does not normally "count" as suffering, but I'm going to include it anyway. While this issue of *MF* provides clarity to the realities and dimensions of physical suffering, I want to draw attention to another type of suffering usually not considered worthy enough to warrant serious consideration. Yet I feel it is the type of suffering much more common to the experience of the average *MF* reader. I refer to the suffering inflicted on believers not by an intolerant environment but by a merely disbelieving one. Really.

Suffering can be measured by degree, and I would argue that any kind of suffering, even the unworthy lesser types, are attempts by Satan to thwart God's Kingdom purposes, and have proven to be very effective. If suffering has to do with enduring pain, distress, loss, injury, etc., then there is a wide spectrum within which it can be experienced.

Obviously, the loss of life or limb has a tendency to curb evangelistic fervor! Yet consider a lesser form. Young believers (in any country) face a tidal wave of peer pressure to adopt and practice un-biblical cultural norms. Anyone who puts up a serious fight is sure to encounter a certain amount of distress. (For some college students, not drinking in excess is committing social suicide.) At the very least, there is often a loss of social status and self-esteem. Because this "suffering" is so very real, the majority of young believers simply opt for a cloaked expression of faith and a muted witness, or they lose their faith altogether. Can you imagine how many people Satan has sidelined from effective witness through this one lesser form of suffering?!

I'm suggesting that being physically and mentally tortured is in some ways similar to being pressured into ungodly behavior. In both scenarios, Satan capitalizes on our fear of suffering to limit our witness. The only difference is one of degree. Make no mistake, that is one BIG difference, yet when looked at from a utilitarian perspective, they both have the same result: stopping Kingdom advance. Suffering in this sense is a universal phenomenon, and there is no place it is not felt. Intimidation isn't limited to the torture chamber. Its subtler forms abound in every society and culture.

So how do we prepare people to be willing to suffer? The two types of suffering contrasted here suggest an answer: ability to endure low-level suffering will inform and prepare one for the high-level kinds. In his 1966 classic, *Dedication and Leadership*, Douglas Hyde details the ways and means the Communist Party utilized to prepare workers willing to endure hardship and suffering. He says,

Quite deliberately, and with good reason, the Party sends its new members, whenever possible, into some form of public activity before instruction begins. More specifically, it is designed to commit the recruit publicly to Communism. Quite often this will take the form of being sent out to stand at the side of the street or in some public place selling Communist papers, periodicals or pamphlets. This may appear to be a very simple, somewhat low-grade form of activity. It is in fact of profound psychological significance.... Humble as the task may appear, to engage in it requires for many people a certain degree of moral courage. . . . It requires another act of moral courage to remain in a fight for which, he by now realizes, he is not fully equipped. And moral courage is not a bad starting-point for future action.

If we faithfully endure the small sufferings well, we are better prepared for the larger ones. The moral courage necessary to stand up under peer pressure as a teenager, if nurtured and grown, can one day provide the faith and hope needed to endure higher forms of suffering.

Yet, in a sense, we cannot really prepare for suffering. We can only prepare for the next day of walking with the Lord, which is accomplished by taking full advantage of this one. A life that is formed by the Word and the Spirit, shaped by obedience and accountability in community, and molded by faithfulness and endurance, will not be ashamed when the day of suffering comes.

Jesus suffered. So will we. Let us suffer well. f



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