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Suffering and Glory

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God's Enabling Grace In the Path of Suffering

Roger D. Duke

The following article is taken from Chapter One of the forthcoming book, *Reason for the Season: Ministerial Reflections on Personal Grief, Suffering and Loss* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2010). The book is due out this summer. For more information on titles by Founders Press, see www.founderspress.com

When the idea for the book *Reason for the Season* was first conceived, it was like most of God's work done in the lives and hearts of Christ's followers. It had a beginning and a continuation process, but the outcomes are generally unknown to us and only known to our Sovereign Lord. In the midst of any catastrophic issue comes many life questions that the theologians and philosophers from time immemorial have been unable to answer adequately. The main one of these is the "Why?" When these times of catastrophe come—as they surely will—it is natural and normal to begin a long and deep introspection process. This reflection is sure to become more acute especially for one who would become a "fully devoted follower of Jesus Christ."¹

In times of introspection we all parse out the "why" question into many other of its component parts. We want to assign blame! We want to find a reason! We want to know the cause for the predicament where we presently find ourselves! More times than not, we must come to grip with the fact that whether we want to admit it, some of the issues may lie within us. In this quagmire of doubt and self examination, we long to find who we are—really are. Howard Thurman, in his *For the Inward Journey*, gave some helpful insight that could encourage the questioner. He stated: "The desire to be one's self is ever present. Equally persistent is the tendency to locate the responsibility for the failure to be one's true self in events, per-

sons, and conditions—all of which are outside and beyond one’s self.”² This self-examination, or search “to be one’s self” will be a major consideration of this short essay.

This reflection will be governed by three dynamics. First, I will reflect on our son’s condition and how it has impacted my ministerial and wider life. Secondly, Howard Thurman’s volume, *For the Inward Journey: The Writings of Howard Thurman*, will be employed because of its devotional and lasting personal impact. Thirdly, Robert Mulholland’s “Definition of Spiritual Formation”³ will serve as a reflective lens through which these thoughts have passed as this work was composed.

Personal Ministry Formation

I was really young when I was “called” into the ministry. I was not so much young in age as I was in maturity and idealism. I had no idea what I would be facing when we left Nashville, Tennessee on January 1, 1982 to come to Memphis to attend Mid America Baptist Theological Seminary. And I certainly had no understanding how it would impact my wife, who was six months pregnant at the time, and our two year old daughter. I had been trained as a union pipefitter, steamfitter, and welder. This thing of seminary was altogether new to me. Could I do the rigorous work that Mid America demanded? That remained to be seen.

In the midst of the stresses and strains of balancing family and seminary life—typing academic papers, taking tests, tackling the lack of money, preaching on the weekends, working seemingly never-ending menial jobs to provide for the family—there was the surprise of a second seminary baby. Roger (Dale) Duke, Jr. was born on June 30, 1983. Although he was a “Jr.,” he was called by our common middle name in order to preserve his own identity.

My wife and I were completely immersed in this new-to-us thing called “the ministry.” As I moved through Mid America’s Diploma of Theology (later renamed Associate of Divinity) program, God began to move in my heart that I should go on and further my education. So the tedium previously described above seemed to go on endlessly. I would go as a candidate to churches seeking to call a pastor, and there would be nothing to come of the preached “trial sermon” or pastoral interview. I worked part time jobs but eventually found a full time job in order for us to live and pay the bills. I even found a small country church where I could preach and minister on the weekends. All the while I held to the conviction that real academic education was a goal and end for the ultimate God would have me do.

During the hustle and bustle of these first days of ministry and education, my dear wife was a real “soldier of the cross.” She never once complained about our financial or ministerial circumstances or the long-haul educational road that lay ahead for us both. Because I had no prior academic preparation, it would take at least ten to fifteen years to complete my master’s and doctoral work. It was during these early days that we began to have problems with Dale’s health. Linda has a wonderful mind and great powers of observation. She is trained as a scientist and worked for years in medical research at Vanderbilt University. She began to sense, as well as see, that something was fundamentally wrong with this our third child. I might add that this was the boy-child that every man wants so desperately to have. At about the age of six months he was not sitting up as he should and also not doing other things that his two sisters had done at the same age.

This is when Linda and I began the arduous task of having him examined, evaluated and shuttled from doctor to doctor. This seems, in retrospect, that it was a never-ending process. What made it so much more acute were the facts concerning his myriad of diagnoses. In the physical and psychological evaluations it was discovered that he had a small brain. This bears the technical medical name of *micro-cephaly*. He was also developmentally delayed, as Linda had surmised. He was hypo-tonic in muscle tone and development. They also told us that he was mentally retarded. In the midst of these “medical guesses” as I have learned to refer to them, one of the teams of doctors and psychologists told us the worst possible news—news that I can hardly repeat even now because the depth of pain! Still! We were told that he had a degenerative brain disorder that would eventually take his young life.

In the twenty five years following, Dale has had around 15 surgeries for various and sundry issues—so many episodes and surgeries that it is hard to remember them through the haze of age. In retrospect, I truly wish that I had kept a journal or diary. No doubt, those remembrances would have been precious now. He had so many hospital stays and nearly died on numerous occasions. We are blessed at the time of this writing that we have not had a life-threatening “event” for some four years. But there will always be another chapter to be written concerning his life and care.

As you can imagine, this news devastated us. The severity of the totality of these circumstances would henceforth form us ministerially, vocationally, emotionally and familiarly. I began learning one major thing during those long and dark days at the first of Dale’s health issues. I share this with the “Spiritual Aspects of Care” classes I regularly teach at Baptist College of Health Sciences. In this class we investigate the dynamics

and connections between the body and spiritual components of persons in times of grief and suffering. I argue that the body cannot be affected without the inner person—the spiritual person—also having repercussions at some level. What I share is very simple indeed and yet so very profound: There is an inseparable symbiosis between the inner person and the outer person. We truly are physical as well as spiritual beings that together make up the whole. Then I warn my students. Never tell your patient that you know or understand how s/he feels. You do not! You cannot possibly know how they feel at a given point in time. But through all of those feelings of *denial, anger, bargaining, depression* there finally came some level of *acceptance*.⁴ It did for us.

Robert Mulholland: A Definition of Spiritual Formation

One of the main problems I had in the beginning of my call and preparation for ministry was the lack of understanding God's way of doing things long-term. It seems He was not concerned with time and issues surrounding that context as much as we (I am) are. For me to go through and then seemingly go through again and again, the health issues with Dale was more than just a little disconcerting. When all this began I was young and ready to go! Give me something to do and I would do it in straight order! Even in my perpetual degree-seeking process, I only needed to know where the next school was, what the next degree was, who the next professor was, what the next assignment was, what were the next books I had to buy, and how do I finance it all. I was in "attack mode" throughout those years.

But God is in the process mode and not the punctilliar mode. He knows that we, as humans, take much time to change. He also knows that that change comes slowly and incrementally for us. We are much more like the Queen Elisabeth II luxury liner which takes much time and lumbers along, rather than a ski boat that darts and turns about quickly. More than likely, we spent a great deal of time getting here—like the QE II, and it is going to take a great deal of time for us to get out of our present predicament. It is the process of the time taken that forms our character. Character is formed in a very, very slow process. For some of us, more than others, it takes a lifetime. There are those followers of Christ who are "quick studies." But I am not one of those. I am confident that I would not, nor could not, have learned what little that I have learned without the grace of God working through this long and drawn-out process of Dale's health issues.

Part of Mulholland's definition, that of *being conformed to the image*

of Christ, is found right in the middle of one of the most wonderfully perplexing passages of Scripture in all of the New Testament. Here the Apostle Paul wrote: “And we know that all things work together for good, to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose” (KJV). This is the midst of the context of Paul’s “Five Golden Links of Salvation”—foreknowledge, predestination, calling, justification and glorification. It is not our concern here to deal with this issue theologically. However, the idea of being conformed to the image of Christ seems to be set in the midst of what God is doing from eternity past into eternity future; i.e., the changing of the believer into the character of His dear Son—our Lord Christ. Suffering is bound to come. And it comes for different reasons. We all suffer. The Scriptures also declare in Job 5:7: “Yet man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward” (KJV).

The reasons for humanity’s suffering vary greatly. We suffer because of our personal sin and rebellion. We suffer because of the sin and rebellion of others. We suffer because of foolishness and lack of wisdom. We suffer from the results of bad choices. Someone might have a history of a certain disease in his family. They know they should take better care of their health as far as what they eat, exercise, or other personal lifestyle habits. But for whatever reason, they do not follow a good course of health for themselves. Wars come. Young men go off to fight and come home in metal caskets. We get old. Sicknesses unto death come, and suffering attends the sicknesses. Sometimes is it not a “sickness unto death.” Sometimes it is a debilitating disease with all of its complications and sufferings. And sometimes a child is born with some measure of disability. In some extreme cases someone may even have to suffer persecution or martyrdom for the Master. But through each and every form of suffering, seemingly caused or uncaused, the follower of Christ will suffer. John Piper declares concerning the Christian’s suffering:

If we would see God honored in the lives of our people as the supreme value, highest treasure, and deepest satisfaction of their lives, then we must strive with all out might to show the meaning of suffering, and help them see the wisdom and power and goodness of God behind it ordaining; above it governing; beneath it sustaining; and before it preparing. This is the hardest work in the world—to change the minds and hearts of fallen human beings; and make God so precious to them that they count if all joy when trials come, and exult in their afflictions, and rejoice in the plundering of the property, and say in the end, “To die is gain.”⁵

I was once blessed to hear a sermon by Rev. Don Moore, former Ex-

ecutive-Secretary for The Arkansas (Southern Baptist) State Convention. In this sermon, Dr. Moore stated an alternative definition of grace that I had not encountered before. He said that grace was, “God’s merciful enabling.”⁶ That concept was very interesting to me. Moore went on to state the case that by the same grace that we had been converted, it was the self-same grace that we were to be empowered to live the Christian life.⁷ God had not left us alone unto our own devices. But, how is it that this grace comes to the believer? What does this grace look like? How will I know I have this merciful enabling by God for the job or circumstance at hand?

Once again, we can look at Mulholland’s definition for guidance. He states that what God does is done by “the gracious working of God’s Spirit.” As I have grown (although somewhat slowly and awkwardly at times), I have learned that God is not necessarily concerned with what is going on outside of me. But he is more concerned with what is going on within me. I am not saying that God is not sovereign and in complete control of all of life’s circumstances. What I am saying is that for the person to whom some external issue has caused them some great difficulty, or sickness, or trauma, or even death, God knows and cares. But there is a “greater weight of glory” that Paul talks about. That greater weight has to do with the character formation of His children. That is where “the gracious working of God’s Spirit” comes to bear on the follower of Christ.

One of the great questions the philosophers and theologians have asked since time immemorial is “WHY?” All of the world religions, all major philosophical “schools of thought,” all Christian theological systems, and every single human being of every hue who ever lived has pondered evil, suffering and grief. It does not seem to have an answer. But the Christian knows that if we cling to our relationship with Christ that we can be changed internally in and through whatever external circumstance we might be called to suffer for the Savior. The great Apostle Paul, the great apostle to the Gentiles declared: “Therefore, we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day” (NIV).⁸ The mature Christian also knows that God has a work to do in the world.

Probably more times than not, external circumstances—evil, suffering, grief, or loss—are used of the Father to work in us a conformation to the image and character of His dear son, Christ Jesus. We are then changed, as it were, from the outside in. Then we can be used as tools for His greater purposes as change agents for the *transformation of the world*.⁹ It would appear that many (I dare not say most), never get over or get out of the blame they cast upon God their Heavenly Father. They are left bereft of a sense of His love and power and grace in their lives. How hardly do we see

someone who recovers and goes on to be involved in this transformation of the world that Mulholland has captured in this succinct definition. The old black preacher declared in his sermon on Job: “God gives (or allows) these things to come to us to make us *better—not bitter!*” [this writer’s emphasis] There is something in the world God wants done, and He wants us to be instruments of His transformation power.

Wise and Sure Words

As I have wrestled over the years for some knowledge and consolation in my own spiritual formation journey, I have read extensively in spirituality and devotional readings of many in church history—Calvin, Luther, Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, John Bunyan, Chrysostom, Oswald Chambers, St. Thomas, Charles Spurgeon, et al. All of these have all been “friends” as I have sought answers. One of the most moving devotionals in my own experience has no doubt been John Chrysostom and his commentary on Zechariah 13:9. There the Scriptures declare: “And I . . . will refine them as silver is refined, and will try them as gold is tried: they shall call on my name, and I will hear them; I will say, it is my people; and they shall say, The Lord is my God.”

Chrysostom observed concerning the text:

Refiners throw pieces of gold into the furnace to be tested and purified by the fire. In the same way, God allows human souls to be tested by troubles until they can become pure, transparent, and have profited greatly from the process. Therefore, this is the greatest advantage we have. So then, we shouldn’t be disturbed or discouraged when trials happen to us. For if refiners know how long to leave a piece of gold in the furnace, and when to draw it out, if they don’t allow it to remain in the fire until it is burnt up and destroyed, how much better does God understand this process! When He sees that we have become more purer, He frees us from our trials so that we won’t be crushed and defeated by them. Therefore, we shouldn’t retreat or lose heart when unexpected things happen to us. Instead, we should submit to the One who knows best and will test our hearts by fire as He likes. He does this for a reason and for the good of those who are tried.¹⁰

Through all of this there is one thing that I am learning to be absolutely sure and true. This is the same life lesson that Job learned throughout his trials and tribulations: “Lesson #1—God is God! Lesson #2—I am not!”¹¹

Concluding Reflections

Turning once again to Howard Thurman's *For the Inward Journey*, I find words that soothe an old tired soul and allow me to have a sense of peace in my own personal journey. Thurman wrote:

Thomas a Kempis reminds us that in the nature of life, and man's experience in it, that there be what he calls "war and affliction." This is not a note of pessimism or futility—it is rather recognition that conflict [grief and suffering]¹² is a part of the life process. Again and again in the struggle a man may experience failure, but he must know for himself even though such is his experience, the final word has not been spoken.... Mr. Valliant-for-Truth in [Bunyan's] *Pilgrim's Progress* says, "My sword I give to him that shall succeed me in my pilgrimage, and my courage and skill to him that can get it. My marks and my scars I carry with me, to be a witness for me that I have fought His battle who will be my rewarder."¹³

Grief, suffering, war, loss and conflict are all the plight of humans it seems. But how do we deal with them? How do we respond? How should the "fully devoted follower of Christ" react? Should we not respond in a supernatural way? Or even on another plane altogether? We do suffer! That is true. But Paul declares in his first epistle to the Thessalonians that they were to respond in hope: "But I would not have you to be ignorant brethren... that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope."¹⁴ This hope is not only that which looks forward to the resurrection. It is that hope that empowers us and teaches us of Christ's way in the "here and the now!" It is actually one of the many internal dynamics that the Holy Spirit employs for use as a means for conforming us to the Father's beloved Son—Christ Jesus.

Many, many years ago at a Bible conference, even before I knew the Lord was moving in my heart to follow Him in the ministry, I heard a song. It was a song that gripped my heart and has become my "journey prayer" of sorts. I was foolish enough to pray the song as a prayer and have on some level ever since. I share this prayer now as an indicator of what I think it means to follow Christ on our journey fully, devotedly, and completely—not that I have attained! The song is "Whatever it Takes" by Lanny Wolfe:

There's a voice calling me
From an old rugged tree
And He whispers, "Draw closer to Me"

Leave this world far behind
There are new heights to climb
And a new place in me You will find.”

For whatever it takes to draw closer to You,
Lord, that’s what I’ll be willing to do.
For whatever it takes to be more like You
That’s what I’ll be willing to do.

Take the dearest things to me,
If that’s how it must be
To draw me closer to Thee
Let the disappointments come,
Lonely days without the sun,
If through sorrow more like You I’ll become.

For whatever it takes to draw closer to You,
Lord, that’s what I’ll be willing to do.
For whatever it takes to be more like You
That’s what I’ll be willing to do.

Take my houses and lands
Change my dreams, change my plans
For I’m placing my whole life in Your hands
And if you call me today
To a place far away
Lord I’ll go and Your will obey.

For whatever it takes to draw closer to You,
Lord, that’s what I’ll be willing to do.
For whatever it takes to be more like You
That’s what I’ll be willing to do.

I’ll trade sunshine for rain
Comfort for pain—
That’s what I’ll be willing to do
For whatever it takes for my will to break
That’s what I’ll be willing to do
That’s what I’ll be willing to do!¹⁵

The totality and sum of all these issues for me lies in a statement from Albert Mohler. Mohler said: “There is much we do not understand. As Charles Spurgeon explained, when we cannot trace God’s hand, we must simply trust His heart.”¹⁶ ☺

Notes:

¹ Sam Shaw, “Our Goal is to Lead All Peoples to Become Fully Devoted Followers of Christ,” Germantown Baptist Church, Germantown, TN, 1998–2006. This was one of Germantown Baptist Church’s core values adopted under Shaw’s tenure of pastoral leadership.

² Howard Thurman, *For the Inward Journey: The Writings of Howard Thurman* (Richmond, ID: Friends United Press, 2002), 85.

³ Robert Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 15–17. Mulholland defined Spiritual Formation: “Spiritual formation is the process of being conformed to the image of Christ by the gracious working of God’s Spirit, for the transformation of the world.”

⁴ For a fuller discussion of the “Kubler-Ross’s Stages of Grief” Theory see: Myers, D. *Psychology*, Fourth Edition (New York: Worth Publishing), 143.

⁵ John Piper, “Preaching to Suffering People,” *Feed My Sheep: A Passionate Plea for Preaching* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2002), 242–243.

⁶ Don Moore, quote taken from a sermon given at the annual Greater Life Evangelism conference (G.L.E.A.). The G.L.E.A. conference was the home coming Bible conference held by Evangelist Sam T. Cathey and hosted by the Grand Avenue Baptist Church, Fort Smith, AR, for Cathey’s Board of Advisors and supporters. This quote is remembered vividly by the author and has had a great influence in his personal life in the years hence. The quote was *circa* 1981.

⁷ See Ephesians 2:8–10.

⁸ See Paul’s entire confession in 2 Corinthians 4:16–18.

⁹ See citation 3 above, Mulholland’s definition of Spiritual Formation.

¹⁰ Christopher D. Hudson, J. Alan Sharrer, and Lindsay Vanker, eds., “Tested by Fire” by John Chrysostom, in *Day by Day with the Early Church Fathers: Selected Readings for Daily Reflection* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 13.

¹¹ This is a little axiom that I employ when I have students in the Religion 302, *Spiritual Aspects of Care* class, at the Baptist College of Health Sciences, read the Old Testament Book of Job.

¹² Essayist’s Interpolation.

¹³ Thurman, *For the Inward Journey*, 59.

¹⁴ See 1 Thessalonians 4:13. It is clear from the passage that Paul is here discussing the “hope of the resurrection.” But there is no doubt that this self-same hope expressed by the believers concerning Christ’s resurrection and their own bodily resurrection can be appropriated for the ongoing grinds of this life of grief, suffering, and the spiritual formation these can cause.

¹⁵ Lanny Wolfe, “That’s What I’ll Be Willing To Do,” taken from electronic source <http://preciouslordtakemyhand.com/publish/christianhymns/whatever-it-takes>, 20 February 2009.

¹⁶ R. Albert Mohler, “The Goodness of God and the Reality of Evil,” commentary by R. Albert Mohler, Jr., taken from electronic source http://www.albertmohler.com/commentary_print.php?cdate=2005-08-30, 3 February 2009.