

The Elisabeth Elliot Newsletter

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Exulting in Suffering

So often people make remarks such as, “Isn’t it strange how God allows such awful things to happen—and she’s such a *good* person.” It isn’t all mystery, though of course God’s permission of evil in the world is fathomless to us mortals. He has told us the most important reasons why we must suffer if we belong to Him.

The apostle Peter writes, “My friends, do not be bewildered by the fiery ordeal that is upon you, as though it were something extraordinary. It gives you a share in Christ’s sufferings, and that is cause for joy” (1 Peter 4:12-13, NEB). When we remember that Peter was writing his letter to exiles, we can try to imagine all the various kinds of suffering that were involved for them. They had been banished from their homes, separated from their loved ones, and cut off from their livelihoods, all through no fault of their own. Their children had forgotten the homelands cherished in their parents’ memories. Some had died.

Peter had been through a few mills himself, and understood deeply how they were feeling and the quite natural human tendency to be bewildered when you’re in the middle of trouble. Don’t be, he says.

He does not deny that it is “fiery.” He calls it an ordeal. That’s honest. But he tells them it’s nothing out of the ordinary. It is what all of us ought to expect in one form or another, as long as we’re following Jesus. What else should we expect? Jesus said we would have to give up the right to ourselves, take up His cross, and follow. He said we would have to enter the Kingdom of God “through much tribulation.” We bargained for a steep and narrow road—why should we be

bewildered to find it steep and narrow? The thrilling, heart-lifting truth that Peter speaks of is that in this very ordeal, whatever it is, we are being granted an unspeakably high privilege: a share in Christ’s sufferings, and that, Peter says, is cause for joy.

Sometimes people wonder how on earth *their* kind of trouble can possibly have anything to do with Christ’s sufferings. Ours are certainly nothing in comparison with His. We are not being crucified. Our burden is certainly not the weight of the sins of the world. No. But in all our afflictions He is afflicted. We are together in them. If we receive them in faith—faith that they are permitted by a Father who loves us, faith that He has an eternal purpose in them—we can offer them back to Him so that He can transform them. If, like Paul, we want to know Him and the power of His resurrection, we must also know the fellowship of His sufferings. The only way to enter that fellowship is to suffer. Can we say, *Yes, Lord*—even to that?

Suffering is the Christian’s boot camp. Those who are preparing to be soldiers must give evidence that they’ve got what it takes. A grueling course of endurance tests is set for them. Some survive and some don’t. Some decide early in the game that it’s not really worth it, and they drop out.

In his wonderful chapter about grace, Romans 5, Paul tells us that we’ve entered the sphere of God’s grace and can therefore exult in the hope of the divine splendor that is to be ours. “More than this, let us even exult in our present sufferings, because we know that suffering trains us to endure” (v. 3).

No normal person enjoys suffering. To “exult,” however, is an action verb. It means to leap for joy, to be jubilant. It is said that when St. Francis of Assisi was persecuted, he literally danced in the street for joy. He was simply being obedient to Jesus’ command to rejoice when men revile you and persecute you. You can only rejoice if you take the long view, however—the view that sees the great reward in heaven. You certainly can’t rejoice if all you can see is the persecution.

“Endurance brings proof that we have stood the test, and this proof is the ground of hope. Such a hope is no mockery, because God’s love has flooded our inmost heart through the Holy Spirit he has given us” (Romans 5:4-5, NEB).

I’ve never been in an army boot camp. I’ve seen pictures, and it looks awful. I can’t imagine anybody enjoying some of the endurance tests that are required, *except* as the goal is kept in mind: “I’m going to be a soldier. I’m going to prove myself. I’ll lick this thing if it kills me.”

My father took us mountain-climbing when we were growing up; we were thrilled with the chance to stand the test. My brothers were certainly not going to let me beat them at it, nor would I dream of making them slow down just for me. There is an exhilaration in endurance. Often I see it on the face of small boys in airports. They’ve just met Daddy at the plane, and insist on lugging his attaché case or even his suitcase. “Sure I can, Dad!” they say, and their faces shine.

We are under the mercy of an infinitely loving Father. He will never allow us to suffer beyond what He knows is the proper measure. In the middle of it, the suffering is *real*, not to be compared, of course, to the small boy with the suitcase. I think of those, for example, who are tortured because of their faith, or tortured by cancer. At such a time one desperately needs the Everlasting Word to fall back on—the Word, which stands forever and which nothing on earth or in heaven can ever change. Divine splendor *is* to be ours.

The soldier thinks of pleasing his commanding officer, receiving a commission, perhaps, and some day winning a victory. “Such a hope is no mockery” for the Christian who suffers. He can be absolutely sure that there is a reason and purpose behind it all. Phillips’ translation of the passage has *steadfastness, soundness, and hope* as the reasons. In that, the soldier can legitimately exult.

A Double Cross

“Sufferings arising from anxiety, in which the soul adds to the cross imposed by the hand of God an agitated resistance and a sort of unwillingness to suffer—such troubles arise only because we live to ourselves. A cross wholly inflicted by God, and fully accepted without any uneasy hesitation, is full of peace as well as of pain. On the contrary, a cross not fully and simply accepted, but resisted by the love of self, even slightly, is a double cross; it is even more a cross, owing to this useless resistance.”

François de la Mothe Fénelon

Joy

Joy is not the absence of suffering
But the presence of God.

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At Our Best

“We are not at our best when we are most exuberant, most impetuous, most abounding, most enthusiastic, most eager, but when we are pulling most gravely, steadily, courageously in our appointed duties, when we are almost swamped by difficulties, weariness, seeming impossibilities, but all the time our face bravely turned towards Eternity, our heart lovingly towards God and our will determined to fight and fight to death.”

Janet Erskine Stuart

Is God on Our Side?

“Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, ‘Are you for us or for our enemies?’ ‘Neither,’ he replied, ‘but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come.’ Then Joshua fell face-down to the ground in reverence, and asked him, ‘What message does my Lord have for his servant?’” (Joshua 5:13-14, NIV).

Confronted by the warrior angel, Joshua wanted to know whose side he was on. “Are you for us or for our enemies?” The answer—“Neither.” In other words, God has no “sides” in our sense of the word. God *is* a side. He has a plan that we can obey—or rebel against. Joshua fell on his face in worship and humility, asking, “What does my Lord bid his servant?” That was the right question, spoken from the right position (face down in the dirt). The only answer from God given at that time was, “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy.” He did that.

Then if you keep reading in Joshua 6, you see the astonishing story of the collapse of the walls of Jericho. Whether it is for national affairs or the minor conflicts of our daily lives, God’s word of direction is the *only* side of the question to consider.

Letter to a Reader

My dear friend:

Thank you for entrusting me with your extremely difficult situation. It is, alas, an all-too-familiar one since I have received so many letters like yours.

I agree with the counselors to whom you have gone that you may divorce your recalcitrant husband. Scripture allows it—but Scripture does not *require* it. You have a choice. If you choose to stay with your husband, you can count on the help of your Heavenly Father to give you a quiet and gentle spirit.

As you mentioned, you will not know whether he is continuing to carry on his illicit practices. You know that *he* knows and *God* knows, and you can simply leave it there. You can, by God’s grace, continue to pursue sanctification within your marriage. No one can obstruct that choice. It might be wise to make clear to your husband that you will no longer pry into his activities. Any further investigation will be solely by his own conscience and, of course, by the all-seeing eye of God Himself, to whom he will one day have to answer.

You ask if you should “take the out and run.” I would urge you not to. The Lord will, I believe, enable you to leave your frustrations, anger, and pain. As for those who “think you are nuts to continue in his home,” commit them to God. Memorize Isaiah 43:1-2 and 50:7-10. As you have done for all these years, continue to honor Christ in all that you do.

Talk to God About Everything

If the frightened chirp of a falling sparrow reaches the Throne Room of the Lord of the Universe as the Bible says it does, we can be sure He is not too high to pay attention to our smallest prayer.

Learn to talk to God about *everything*. It saves

so much energy to obey Paul's word in Philippians 4:6—"Have no anxiety, but in everything make your requests known to God in prayer and petition with thanksgiving. Then the peace of God, which is beyond our utmost understanding, will keep guard over your hearts and your thoughts, in Christ Jesus" (NEB).

Spread before Him in the morning all that you have to do that day, all the decisions that hang over your head for the next week or next year, the shopping, the interviews, the children, the boss, the lawn and garden, the car, the neighbors, schoolwork, boyfriends, money—you name it. But be sure to name it to Him. Peace will be the result, if you name it with thanksgiving, trusting that the One to whom you are naming it cares for you.

Q

*If thou but suffer God to guide thee,
And hope in Him through all thy ways,
He'll give thee strength, whate'er betide thee,
And bear thee through the evil days.
Who trusts in God's unchanging love
Builds on the rock that naught can move.*

"If Thou But Suffer God to Guide Thee," (verse one)

Georg Neumark

Notes From Lars

This newsletter is unique in not coming to the end of the fiscal year clothed in red ink. We are grateful, and we thank the Lord and all of you who so generously responded in 2001 to our renewal offers. Your donations make it possible for us to send the newsletter overseas to over seventy countries.

On a personal note, we are grateful for a wedding. In December, namesake granddaughter Elisabeth was married at Wheaton College to Mat Martin, a very fine British physicist who deals with all those tiny little particles that make up things. After Elisabeth graduates from Wheaton, they plan to move to the U.K.

In the last issue I neglected to mention that the documentary video *Through Gates of Splendor* is available in Spanish as well as English. Either can be had from other sources for about \$20, or directly from me at \$15—"whatever makes you feel good," as some folks say.

May the Lord bless you.

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