

OUT

The

OF

Mystery

THE

of

DEPTHS

Suffering

Steve Phillips

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Freely you have received, freely give [Mt.10:8]

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DEDICATED TO

MY DEARLY BELOVED PATRICIA ANN

Who has descended to the Roots of the Mountains
Beneath all His Breakers and Billows,
And from Out of the Depths has learned to cry,
Salvation is of the Lord!

and to

MY ESTEEMED BROTHER BOB HAINES

Who has passed through Dark Waters;
My fellow partaker in the Tribulation,
Kingdom and Perseverance in Jesus

in fond memory of

THE SAINTLY MERCHANT KING

Who has gone to Eternal Comfort
Having spent the last half of his life confined to a Wheelchair
From which, with devoted emphatic Fervor,
He exclaimed more than once,
Let there be no wasted Suffering!

1

FROM EDEN

FROM EVERY TREE OF THE GARDEN YOU MAY FREELY EAT,
BUT... [Gen.2:16, 17]

Unmolested freshness graced every bud and blade in Eden's
pristine splendor. Thorns and thistles, grime and sweat
were things yet unknown. All was bliss for all was **very good**
[Gen.1:31].

Every tree **good for food and a delight to the eyes** [Gen.2:9]
lavished this haven of mercy. The tree of life in its midst along with
that of the knowledge of good and evil were found there. All was well.
Nothing harmed and nothing alarmed.

Nothing alarmed, that is, except the strange decree, **...you
shall not eat of it...you shall surely die** [Gen.2:17].

What isolated this tree from all else? Hideous to the eye it was
not. No corpses of unwitting beasts littered its fair trunk. Rank odors
did not repulse any who approached. Poison dripped not from its
lush leaves.

To all appearances it differed in no respect from its
surroundings. It too delighted the vision and was fine for food. All
was very good.

Why, then, forbidden? Gaze as you may, nothing presented
itself to reason's eye to refuse its fruit. Nothing appreciable in itself
would caution or repel the beholder.

By sight, nothing persuaded man to comply with God's voice. Through reflection, no reasons surfaced to convince the mind why the command ought to be heeded.

"Why" remained unanswered, undiscerned. By searching, no clue was unearthed to explain the enigma of this strange decree. Finally, having exhausted the fruitless inquiry, only one cause to obey remained.

God had spoken. He must be obeyed simply because the very fact of His being God demands that we do.

The Lord may yet obscure your path with shadows. Disturbing unanswered questions may plague your restless mind. You may cry out repeatedly in vain for explanations that never are forthcoming.

But this you know, He must be obeyed, though you can't tell why. It is a distressing state. We prefer rather to be in the know, to choose what is agreeable to our own understanding. But this is walking by sight and not by faith. And such sight proves to be no test of love and devotion at all.

Faith obeys God in the midst of perplexities. It honors God though all evidences point to the contrary. Raw faith says, "God has spoken, His Word must be performed."

In the midst of our swirling confusion, God Himself silently watches without intervening as He did in the beginning. Like Adam, we are left alone with His Word amidst circumstances nearly screaming the impossibility and folly of obedience. All the while across spiritual distances, heaven's hosts watch, awaiting the outcome as they did then.

Faith's original foundation laid bare is this: God has spoken and He must be obeyed because He is God.

If even one shaft of light has penetrated your heart from considering this first prohibition in Eden, you are on the threshold of grasping the mystery of suffering.

2

ULTIMATE ISSUES

HAVE YOU CONSIDERED MY SERVANT, JOB? [Job 1:8]

God Himself provoked the inquiry. It was the Lord who raised the question. Consider this man. Come, look well, friend or foe alike, or even Satan himself. Consider Job. Search him thoroughly. Examine him to his foundations.

Thus, the ultimate issue was raised by the Lord of Testing. This most critical and fundamental consideration of the ages is exposed. Why does a man fear God and serve Him? What motivates him at the core of his being? The answer to this determines eternal destinies.

Satan had an answer: Man only serves God for the benefits gained thereby. **Does Job fear God for nothing? Have You not made a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But put forth Your hand now and touch all that he has; he will surely curse You to Your face** [Job 1:9-11].

"Man is self-seeking. He has no love for God. Man only serves God for what You give him." This is the devil's accusation. His allegation is that no one honors God simply because He is God, because of who He is. Man is only attracted to God for what he can get from Him.

It is a serious charge. If true, no one will reach heaven. If false, Satan will never reach heaven. These are ultimate issues.

If at the core of a man's heart is the root of self-interest, he is no better than Satan himself. Lucifer became the devil and fell from heaven because of this very thing [Isa.14:12]. He was full of ambition, self-gain, self-seeking [Isa.12:13, 14]. Lucifer promoted himself using God's bounty out of a heart whose concern was not God Himself, but only self-interest. And he **shall be brought down to hell** [Isa.14:15]. It is for this reason that this poses an ultimate issue, yes, the ultimate issue.

Self-seeking casts into hell. It did with Lucifer. It does so for all following in his steps. This is the ultimate issue for man.

But behind this lies a second consideration looming as a dark cloud threatening to dislodge the bedrock of the very throne of justice itself. It is an accusation leveled against the foundation of everlasting righteousness.

The dilemma raised is this. If an essentially self-centered man is welcomed into heaven, then God has no basis to exclude Satan from that place either. If God is "served" [actually, used] by man to obtain his own ends, then man's "love" and "obedience" is a charade, a clever device to cover his inner corruption and nothing more. If that is true, then God is not honored and obeyed at all. On man's terms alone is God "served."

When examined, if the final motivation for man's religious devotion is self-interest, and yet that man is received into heaven as righteous, then God is unjust. God is shown to be unrighteous or a fool, because, without cause, He arbitrarily accepts one self-centered being and excludes another. If self-seeking man attains heaven while self-seeking Satan descends to hell, justice decays into mere whim.

Too pure to approve evil are the eyes of the Lord [Hab.1:13]. The devil knows this very well. Yet he turned this very thing to his own advantage to demand access into heaven in the case of Job.

"You have welcomed Job. You delight boastfully in him. He, You say, fears You and turns away from evil. But I say, he has not turned away from evil. You have cast me out of Your presence saying that my ambitious self-seeking was evil. But Job is full of the same in the depths of his soul.

"I will prove that he is no different than me. I will demonstrate before all heaven that you have no right to reject me and accept him. I will unveil Your injustice. I will expose this double-standard and demand my entrance back into Your realm," thus says Satan.

All heaven is watching. Eternal issues hang in the balance in the unseen spheres. God did not accept the devil's challenge, for it was the Lord who challenged him. For time and eternity the Lord will lay the unshakable ground of the rightful condemnation of self-seeking. His proof centered in a man named Job, a man who suffered at the hand of God, by the will of God, and for the glory of God.

Lucifer, unrivaled in wisdom and beauty, had everything and did not love God [Ezk.28:12-19]. Job, a man who lost everything and was reduced to wretchedness, loved God and trusted Him simply because He is God. Hear him cry, **Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him!** [Job 13:15].

God is vindicated. His judgment is just. He had found a man who through sorrow, affliction, pain, reproach, false accusation, abandonment, and utter privation yet clung to God, maintained his integrity, and magnified the God of heaven simply because He is worthy.

Job condemned the devil. God thereby displayed the grounds upon which He Himself will condemn him as well. Job is in heaven, Satan is not. Job was shown to be free from self through his sufferings while Satan suffers unendingly by reason of being full of self. These are indeed ultimate issues.

Do you not know that the saints will judge the world?...Do

you not know that we will judge angels? [I Cor.6:2, 3]. Do you not know? Do you not know that your every sorrow here below is designed to display the manifold grace of God above?

Are there not eternal issues revolving about your afflictions in this life? Will not your obedience through mists of tears be an everlasting rebuke to once bright spirits now darkened demons?

May you fall on your face and worship, blessing the name of the Lord as did Job. May you not sin or charge God foolishly. May you endure as seeing Him who is unseen.

And may He who is unseen see in you what He saw in Job; one who will trust in Him though He slay you.

Eternal issues depend upon it.

**He died for all that they who live
might no longer live for themselves,
But for Him who died and rose again on their behalf**
[2 Cor.5:15]

3

AFFLICTED IN IRONS

JOSEPH WAS SOLD AS A SLAVE. THEY AFFLICTED
HIS FEET...IN IRONS [Ps.105:17, 18]

Beloved Joseph, favored and blessed by his father, was yet jealously despised by his brothers [Gen.37:3, 4]. Loved by a father, hated by brethren. It is a grievous burden to bear.

Daily tumult, cold glaring disdain, and biting bitter tones afforded no peace in Joseph's tent. God speaks and the grief intensifies. The word from heaven further alienates their estranged hearts. Love and truth they would have none of. Joseph partook of both.

Wherein is comfort? Without? Surely not there amidst his hostile home. When the truth came, even the father himself withdrew his affection upon hearing the news [Gen.37:9, 10].

Joseph was left alone with the truth. God had spoken. Therein is comfort though the promised fulfillment was long delayed. **What is this dream that you have had? Shall I and your mother and your and your brothers actually come to bow ourselves down before you?** [Gen.37:10]. Horrific anguish lay between the glad light of that initial promise and its final realization.

The heart knows its own bitterness and a stranger does not share its joy [Prov.14:10]. It is what Joseph knew, plodding along, a

confounded captive across scorching sands. Unwanted property, worth but 20 shekels [Gen.37:28], he was then sold a second time to his foreign master [Gen.37:36]. There he bowed to all with none bowing to him.

Nothing pointed to the realization of God's word of promise. A numbness of grief creeps over the soul during God's delays. Answers there are not, only the mocking bleakness of a hollow monotony.

Yet the Lord was with him [Gen.39:2]. It is so with all His own; never left, never forsaken [Heb.13:5] though they be cast into dismal pits in jealous rage. Victims of treacherous scorn and hateful envy are not abandoned by their God.

Even if forcibly assaulted by lustful crime, God is there [Gen.39:7-10]. See Joseph flee and suffer for it. Vilified, traitorously maligned, and falsely charged, the righteous one was bound in a dungeon of injustice. **But the Lord was with Joseph** [Gen.39:21].

Unknown to him, he was imprisoned in the Lord's training ground. It was here, amidst shattered dreams and woeful sorrows, that he became what he must to ascend the throne. **The chief jailer committed to Joseph's charge all the prisoners in the jail; so that whatever was done there, he was responsible** [Gen.39:22].

Sympathy for sufferers is gained in Potiphar's prison. Small responsibilities faithfully discharged fit the soul for greater undertakings. **He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much** [Lk.16:10].

Joseph was molded by affliction to look to God alone for favor, wisdom, and deliverance. God had spoken and Joseph must wait. No man can force or hasten the hand of Him who has promised. The realization of the pledge lies in the will and good pleasure of the Promiser.

The Lord was with him [Gen.39:23]. What more is needed? Are God and His Word sufficient for us? Will we endure the

dungeon even delighting in the delays?

We all will meet our cupbearer in the midst of sorrow. "Perhaps he can help," trembles our anxious thoughts. **Remember me...mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of this house** [Gen.40:14].

A certain elation of anticipated relief revitalizes the wearied soul with a bright expectation. "Soon, yes, very soon now, the bitter shall pass. Surely it is well now," imagines our feeble restless heart.

But it is not to be so. The cupbearer **did not remember Joseph, but forgot him** [Gen.40:23]. Two long years yet remained [Gen.41:1]. Initial days were full of eager anticipation with scenarios imagined and then abandoned for yet another explanation to encourage waning hope.

Days stretched into dismal weeks with no word of relief. A certain cloud of despair settles over the soul whose earthly hopes have been crushed. Grim are the cheering rays of sunrise to the grieving soul.

Cupbearers are a refuge of straw against hurling tempests of sorrow. They cannot effect what only the Keeper of your soul can [Ps.121]. Despite our schemes and earnest pleading, we will abide the full duration of the Lord's design for our individual distress.

Until the time that His Word came to pass, the Word of the Lord tested him [Ps.105:19]. Tested - God has spoken, will we believe Him though nothing in our situation would encourage us to do so? Tested - Is His wisdom and design good, acceptable, and perfect? Tested - Can the evil devices of men actually be servants to Him who is Sovereign over the affairs of this life?

God was with him and delivered him out of all his afflictions [Acts 7:9, 10]. The Word of the Lord cannot fail. Deliverance will yet come after sorrow has done its work.

Humiliation must crush all thoughts of grandeur. Rejection by men teaches the soul to cast itself upon the love of God alone.

Unjust betrayal fits a man to commit all into the hands of Him who judges righteously. Schemes aborted lead the heart to distrust its own devices. At one's wits end is designed to open the fount of Wisdom above. Bitter dungeons are endured to purge the soul of bitterness within.

Character, not comfort, is the aim of afflictions sent from above. They marvelously worked in Joseph. He emerged from his sorrows fit for the throne. Hear his own testimony.

God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction [Gen.41:52]. Hear his assessment of evils heaped upon him by brothers' jealous malice. **It was not you who sent me here, but God** [Gen.45:8]. Listen to his final conclusion at the end of it all. **God meant it for good** [Gen.50:20].

Joseph – beloved, hated, exalted. It is what lies between the first and the last which occupies our years of grief below. It could be no other way if the end is to be realized.

4

CHRIST'S SCHOOL OF SUFFERING

ALTHOUGH HE WAS A SON, HE LEARNED OBEDIENCE
FROM THE THINGS HE SUFFERED [Heb.5:8]

In all their affliction He was afflicted [Isa.63:9]. Truly Christ Jesus our Lord was a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief [Isa.53:3].

From birth there was no room for Him except the welcome afforded by sheep and oxen [Lk.2:7]. Chief priests and scribes may know ancient prophesies about the Christ's place of birth, but they have no interest in meeting this King themselves [Mt.2:4-6]. Only a bloodthirsty jealous tyrant wished to find Him that he might "worship" Him – with a drawn sword [Mt.2:8, 13-16].

He fled by night as a fugitive to a foreign land [Mt.2:13, 14] only to return to a lowly despised region of no reputation [Mt.2:23]. Long years of routine physical labor occupied the majority of His life [Mk.6:3]. He toiled, unrecognized and without acclaim, supporting His younger ones who refused to believe Him to be anything other than another member of the family [Jn.7:5].

Though hailed by the Highest in heaven [Mt.3:17], His own nation received Him not [Jn.1:11]. **He was despised and rejected of men...and we did not esteem Him** [Isa.53:3].

Assailed by loathsome evil, the devil tempted Him to the uttermost [Mt.4:1-11]. And men, following in the steps of their father, the devil, vilified and hated Him with mocking disdain.

Do we not rightly say that you are a Samaritan? [Jn.8:48]. **The crowd answered, "You have a demon!"** [Jn.7:20]. Spitefully with venomous malice they spat out the accusation, **We were not born of fornication** [Jn.8:41]. **He deceives the people!** [Jn.7:12]. Even His own people were saying, **He has lost His mind!** [Mk.3:21].

Dear reader, what are you passing through that He has not tasted? What assaults your soul that He was not faced with? This is Jesus, the **One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin** [Heb.4:15].

Christ is He who, **since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted** [Heb.2:18].

He can come to your aid in the blackness of your despair for He has sweat drops of blood in the agony of Gethsemane [Lk.22:44]. He can comfort the wounds of the heart sent from wicked tongues like thrusts of a sword, for men wagged their heads in mocking derision against Him, the Beloved of the Father [Ps.22:6-8].

Grief sent from stubborn insulting loved ones can be borne in the bosom of Him who knew the same [Jn.7:5]. Shattering departure of those dearest to us taken in the icy grip of death's finality is soothed by Him who wept over Lazarus whom He loved [Jn.11:35].

A ravaged heart torn asunder by willful abandonment of those closest to you receives its balm from the pierced hands of Him who cried, **My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?** [Mt.27:46].

Have weary long years of seemingly pointless daily routine bowed the soul, snuffing out hope's glow of eventual spiritual

usefulness? Come to Nazareth and behold your Lord in silent submission those eighteen years at the carpenter's bench [Mk.6:3].

Forgotten and ignored, no sympathy is found to console your anguished soul save that of Him who looked for the same and found none [Ps.69:20, 21].

Poverty grinds away with its relentless scarcity, sapping the soul into anxious pursuits. Come and repose with the Son of Man who had nowhere to lay His head [Lk.9:58]. The grief of the pure in heart who chafe at the unashamed display of godless men surrounding them also deeply assaulted the soul of the Holy One of God [Mt.17:17].

Laid aside, bed-ridden, and prostrate in weariness? Come; find rest and strength from Him who was wearied often [Lk.8:23, Jn.4:6].

In all points He was tempted as are we, but without sin. Only He who has overcome can assist those who must also do the same [Rev.3:21]. Yes, there are things to overcome; grievous pains to be borne, bitter to natural sensibilities, shameful to self-esteem.

They come from Christ. He has designed them that thereby we might overcome, that we will learn obedience through suffering, and that we might know fellowship with the Man of Sorrows. Paul prayed that he might know the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, in order that he might attain to that resurrection out from the dead [Phil.3:10, 11]. To him, suffering was fellowship with Christ. Is it to you?

Suffering, death, and resurrection; this is the necessary sequence. Christ became obedient unto death, even that of the cruelest and most despised, that of a cross [Phil.2:8]. How did He learn such obedience? In the school of suffering of which He is the Master of all would-be followers.

The lessons must be learned thoroughly and remembered well if the disciple would become like His Master [Lk.6:40]. This is His

school. Few endure until promoted on high.

Consider well Him who has endured so great contradiction of sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary, fainting in your souls [Heb.12:3].

While being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously [I Pet.2:23].

Come unto Me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest [Mt.11:28].

5

FURNACE OF AFFLICTION

BEHOLD, I HAVE REFINED YOU, BUT NOT AS SILVER;
I HAVE TESTED YOU IN THE FURNACE OF AFFLICTION [Isa.48:10]

Life made bitter by grueling taskmasters makes tears your food, night and day. It is what Israel knew, enslaved in the iron furnace of Egypt under the Pharaoh who knew not Joseph.

But the Israel of God knew him. They could not forget, for his bones were in their possession. **Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, “God will surely visit you, and you shall carry my bones up from here”** [Gen.50:25].

His bones are the token that Egypt’s suffering is not your lasting portion. As with Joseph’s own life history, they are a reminder that the promise will yet be realized though it delay for long. God will surely visit you.

You will yet be carried up from there to a Canaan of rest. Do not lose sight of Joseph’s bones. Let them remind you of the greater and surer reality yet to come. Greater things are at stake than your immediate comfort from the heated furnace of your affliction.

An Amorite’s iniquity has yet to ripen [Gen.15:16]. The overthrow of world powers is pending [Deut.9:1-5]. Hearts are being prepared to move with a pillar of cloud and fire through a trackless wilderness [Ex.13:21, 22].

Do not flee the flames. God will surely visit you. **But the Lord has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, from Egypt, to be a people for His own possession, as you are this day** [Deut.4:20]. The day will surely come, for He who promises cannot fail.

God has spoken unmistakably. He has chosen and gifted you for a wide sphere of influence unto good for this generation. You are a man after God's own heart.

But senseless and self-consumed opponents block your way and pursue your demise like hunters their prey. You are an outcast, a vilified vagabond with no certain dwelling. Dangers and terrors confront you on every hand. Your enemies are more numerous than the hairs of your head.

Where can you flee? Is there no refuge from these relentless afflictions? Come, dear reader, to the cave of Adullam and join David's band. Walk with him through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. The Lord is there, even in that dark place, though enemies compass you about on every hand. There is yet a table prepared in their presence.

In the midst of uncertainties, hounded by irrational foes, one token abides, **The Lord said, "Arise, anoint him; for this is he"** [I Sam.16:12]. I am God's chosen one, for God has spoken.

Hiding in Adullam's cave where no throne is, leading an unenviable handful of embittered distressed debtors; hardly could this be called a kingdom [I Sam.22:1,2]. Often without bread [I Sam.21:3, 25:8], the promised table spread seems somehow sparse, even a mockery.

What is your consolation to be in these trying straits? Hear David cry, **How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me? How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart all the day? How long will my enemy be exalted over me?**

Consider and answer me, O Lord my God; enlighten my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death, and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my adversaries will rejoice when I am shaken.

But I have trusted in Your lovingkindness; my heart shall rejoice in Your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because He has dealt bountifully with me [Ps.13].

A bounteous dealing by the hand of the Lord awaits all who weep in the desert. His Word will not fail, His servant will never, no, never be forsaken. Let this be your comfort as you pillow your head upon a stone in the dust of your cave.

Tonight, the heavens are black high overhead. It is in dark places that **Thou hast tried my heart; Thou hast visited me in the night; Thou hast tested me, and shall find nothing** [Ps.17:3]. God will surely visit you in the night. May He find in you what He did in David. It is His pathway to the throne.

Is it nothing to all you who pass this way? Behold and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow which was severely dealt out to me, wherewith the Lord has afflicted me in the day of His fierce wrath [Lam.1:12].

For these things I weep; my eye, my eye runs down with water; because far from me is a comforter, one who restores my soul [Lam.1:16]. **My eyes fail because of tears, my spirit is greatly troubled; my heart is poured out on the earth because of the destruction of the daughter of my people, when little ones and infants faint in the streets of the city** [Lam.2:11]. **My eyes pour down unceasingly, without stopping, until the Lord looks down and sees from heaven** [Lam.3:49, 50].

It was for being afflicted over the destruction of the daughter of my people that Jeremiah was known as the weeping prophet. Through grief over the state of God's people, we enter into the heart of God Himself. It is by lamentation that the Lord's depth of anguish

over spiritual revolt is discovered in all its hideousness to our hearts. If we thus know God, we can do nothing but weep.

Then those of you who escape will remember Me...how I have been broken by their adulterous hearts which turned away from Me [Ezk.6:9]. We learn to weep over what God weeps over. His concerns become our own as we weep with Jeremiah and Christ Jesus our Lord over the destruction of Jerusalem.

Through the furnace we are made like our God. There is no other way.

6

THE GOD OF DARKNESS

HOW LONG, O LORD? WILL YOU FORGET ME FOREVER? [Ps.13:1]

The gently led nursing flock whose lambs are carried in the bosom of the Good Shepherd [Isa.40:11], have not yet known the God of darkness. Jubilant multitudes whose lips spill over with “Hosanna” are nowhere to be found when three hours of gloom shroud Golgotha’s hill. Even disciples sleep through the agony of Gethsemane.

For a season, observed our Lord about the multitudes’ response to John, **you were willing to rejoice in his light [Jn.5:35].** But were these gladsome throngs huddled about the Baptist’s cell in Herod’s dungeon? They were not, but God was there.

And thus the God of darkness remained hidden to them. They do not wish to meet Him thus. To them, God is Light; not in the sense of blazing holiness and unapproachable magnificence, but rather “light”, that is, pleasant, cheering, and warm. He is a superficial benefactor who ministers comfort and contentment to shallow admirers. To all such, happiness and ease are the hallmarks of spiritual attainment.

It is inconceivable in their minds that God could ever allow, much less send, darkness, distress, confusion, and unanswered silence. Their God of “light” continuously pampers and coddles His darlings lest they dash their foot against a stone. But they have never known Him in the blackness.

He has driven me away and made me walk in darkness and not in light...in dark places He has made me dwell like those who have long been dead...even when I cry out and call for help, He shuts out my prayer [Lam.3:2, 6, 8]. He has hedged up my way that I cannot pass, and He has set darkness in my paths. He has stripped me of my glory, and taken the crown from my head. He breaks me down on every side and I am gone; and my hope He has torn up as a tree [Job 19:8-10].

When confronted with such passages, the light-minded have a hasty and ready explanation for this condition. “Simple,” they claim, “God is punishing them for their sins.” Like Job’s miserable counselors, they can conceive of nothing else. But this is not the case. Jeremiah had not sinned. Job had not sinned. Listen to his confession.

Behold, I go forward but He is not there, and backward, but I cannot perceive Him; when He acts on the left I cannot behold Him; He turns to the right, I cannot see Him.

But He knows the way I take; when He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold. My foot has held fast to His path; I have kept His way and not turned aside. I have not departed from the command of His lips; I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food.

But He is in one mind and who can turn Him? And what His soul desires, that He does. For He performs what is appointed for me; and many such things are with Him. Therefore I am troubled at His presence: When I consider, I am afraid of Him [Job 23:8-15].

Even the man after God’s own heart passed through the valley of the shadow of death [Ps.23:4]. Though God was there and David trusted in the Lord, yet the face of God was hidden from Him [Ps.143:7, 8].

The sons of Korah had the same testimony. **You have rejected us and brought us to dishonor...You give us as sheep to be eaten...all this has come upon us, but we have not forgotten You, and we have not dealt falsely with Your covenant. Our heart has not turned back, and our steps have not deviated from Your way, yet You have crushed us in the place of dragons, and covered us with the shadow of death...Arouse Yourself, why do You sleep, O Lord?...Why do You hide Your face and forget our affliction and our oppression?** [Ps.44:9, 11, 17-19, 23, 24].

God Himself singled out Job as there was **no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil** [Job 1:8]. Yet this very man encountered the God of darkness as perhaps no other man has, before or since. Hear his cries!

The arrows of the Almighty are within me, their poison my spirit drinks; the terrors of God are arrayed against me...but it is still my comfort and in the pain which spares not, I would rejoice that I have not denied the words of the Holy One [Job 6:2-4, 10].

Have I sinned? What have I done to You, O Watcher of men? Why have You set me as Your target, so that I am a burden to myself? [Job 7:20].

He who crushes me with a tempest, and multiplies my wounds without cause; He does not allow me to get my breath, for He fills me with bitterness [Job 9:17, 18]. God has delivered me over to the ungodly and turned me over into the hands of the wicked. I was at ease, but He has shattered me; He has taken me by the neck and shaken me to pieces, and set me up for His target [Job 16:11, 12].

He has cast me into the mire, and I have become like dust

and ashes. I cry out to You for help, but You do not answer me; I stand up and You turn Your attention against me. You have become cruel to me; with the might of Your hand you persecute me [Job 30:19-21].

It is quite true that your sins have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear [Isa.59:2]. This we grasp as reasonable, having a clear connection between cause and effect. We are comfortable with such explanations as they make sense to us.

But this is not what we are discussing here. In this case, the darkness spoken of is not attributable to the consequences of sin; quite the contrary. Only those who are upright and godly will meet God in this way. The immature and casual will not. Neither the halfhearted and negligent nor the willful and complacent will be visited by the God of darkness.

For Him to reveal Himself thus to them would scatter what little faith they possess. They cannot be entrusted with such a revelation. Their devotion is feeble, needing numerous props of comfort, softness, and cheer to propel them on to continue following God.

What is described here is a determined and purposeful withdrawal by God Himself from the soul who trusts Him indeed. It is an obscuring of His appreciable presence, an eclipsing of the light of His countenance.

God is the initiator of this season of gloom and terrors. The devil is not the agent and sin is not the cause. The blackness of darkness spoken of descends upon the soul of the righteous from the Almighty God of love who dwells in unapproachable light, but who now withdraws into the shrouds of night.

Anguish, groaning, and weeping [Ps.6:3, 6], **trouble** [Ps.10:1], **forgotten** [Ps.13:1], **rejection, dishonor, abandonment, crushing, affliction, and oppression** [Ps.44:9-24], **driven away in darkness**

[Lam.3:2], **misery and bitterness** [Job 3:20, 21], **grief and calamity, arrows of the Almighty, poison, terror, and pain** [Job 6:2-4, 10], **set as God's target** [Job 7:20], **crushing, wounds, bitterness** [Job 9:17, 18], **shattering and shaken** [Job 16:11, 12], **darkness, stripped, broken, and uprooting** [Job 19:8-10], **cast into mire like dust and ashes and persecution** [Job 30:19-21].

All of these are ascribed to the hand of God coming upon His faithful servant. No severer trial can be experienced. This plummets one to the roots of the mystery of suffering; the godly seemingly abandoned in dire straits while heaven keeps a silent vigil and sends no relief.

What will we do when the perceptible presence of God is withdrawn? How will we respond when prayers echo unanswered in hollow tones in our grieving ears? Will love wax cold when no cheering affection is returned from on high?

Does trust decline when distress descends and deliverance departs? Can we yet see Him who is unseen though He Himself has hidden Himself in thick darkness? These are the issues raised by the God of darkness.

If we believe only when results are evident, we are yet walking by sight and not by faith. If we love when affection flows with its warm tide of consolation, the root of self-love yet thrives in our breast. When we fall from righteousness when the arrows of the Almighty apparently "unjustly" enter our heart as His target, we betray a counterfeit uprightness; one which is "right" only if things are "right" to us.

God left him, to test him, to know all that was in his heart [2 Chron.32:31]. He who will **never leave or forsake you** [Heb.13:5], does just that: He leaves. Not in any ultimate or final sense, but to all appearances and sensibilities, He forsakes.

Alone, with no discernable support from any created thing, no human sympathy, and with no earthly encouragement, is a severe trial.

But to be abandoned by the Father in heaven, left to act upon inner spiritual resolve and conviction which owes their source and existence to the very God now absent, is the ultimate test. This transcends all afflictions.

It is a test reserved for the mature. Only they will discern the way of escape in this severest of trials. The young, uncertain, and unstable would be **tempted beyond what they are able** if faced with such. The Lord does not, therefore, test them in this way, for **God is faithful** [I Cor.10:13].

But in the darkness, He will reveal Himself in a manner otherwise unknowable. From Heman the Ezrahite's Psalm 88, let us learn from him who was made sick unto affliction [such is the meaning of Mahalath Leannoth - v.1].

Here was a godly man who cried day and night to the God of his salvation [v.1], whose life was full of troubles [v.3], without strength [v.4], forgotten and cut off from God's hand [v.5].

Thou hast laid me in the lowest pit, in darkness, in the deeps, Thy wrath lies hard upon me, and Thou hast afflicted me with all Thy waves [v.6, 7].

No acquaintance visited or cheered him [v.8] as he daily mourned in his affliction, unanswered by his God [v.9]. It seemed as if his soul had been cast off because the face of God was hidden from him [v.14]. Affliction, fear of death, and terrors were suffered under the hand of God [v.15]. Compassed about with wrath and terrors, with lover and friend removed far from him, is the ending of this Psalm of mournful instruction [v.16-18].

We must take note of several things if we will profit from the visitation of the God of darkness to our souls.

[1] It is godly, spiritual, and mature believers alone who will meet the Lord in this way. We should therefore bow ourselves with our mouths in the dust that we are graced with such a revelation.

[2] It is the God of heaven who casts the soul into this trial of

darkness. It is not the result of personal sin or from satanic attack. God does it. We may therefore submit to it even with thanksgiving for such a visitation.

[3] There is an end. It does not continue interminably. The same David who cried, **Why do You stand afar off, O Lord? Why do You hide Yourself in times of trouble?** [Ps.10:1], also broke forth in joy, saying, **Blessed be the Lord, because He has heard the voice of my supplications. The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusted in Him, and I am helped: Therefore my heart greatly rejoices; and with my song will I praise Him** [Ps.28:6, 7]. Thus it is no permanent condition, not even in this life.

[4] The records of these deepest of all human afflictions have been preserved by the Holy Spirit in the Word of God so that **through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope** [Rom.15:4].

[5] Through these passages we observe that the most saintly of men have passed through such unspeakable sorrows under the hand of God and thus we gain courage to face the same. **As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. We count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the end of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful** [Jas.5:10, 11].

In the darkness we come to grips with the sovereign God before whom we are helpless. Even godliness, prayers, and suffering do not move Him. **He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can hold back His hand or say to Him, "What have You done?"** [Dan.4:35].

Nothing can be done but to lay our hand upon our mouth and endure in utter trust whatsoever is laid upon us. It is the severest trial; no earthly supports, no human sympathy, and the God of heaven strangely withdrawn from His suffering saint. It is darkness indeed.

It is here that we discover that the God who creates light also brings darkness; blessings of peace as well as calamity [Isa.45:7]. Life flows from His hand, but so also does death [Deut.32:39]. The delight and comfort of health is in His power along with sickness and affliction [Ex.4:11]. He is the God of darkness as well as of light.

It had already become dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them [Jn.6:17]. No, not yet. They were alone in the darkness and **the sea arose by reason of a great wind that blew** [Jn.6:18]. It arose from the throne of God and descended from heaven by sovereign decree.

He scatters the cloud of His light: It changes direction, turning around by His counsels; that they may do whatever He commands them on the face of the world in the earth. He causes it to come, whether for correction, or for His land, or for mercy [Job 39:11-13].

It is dark. You are alone in the perilous craft and Jesus has not yet come. And it is here that you will meet the God of darkness.

7

IN THE DUNGEON

BLESSED IS HE WHO DOES NOT STUMBLE OVER ME [Mt.11:6]

A man sent from God [Jn.1:6], indeed, none greater that has been born of women [Mt.11:11] and more than a prophet [Mt.11:9]; this was John. Filled with the Spirit while yet in his mother's womb [Lk.1:15] and coming in the spirit and power of Elijah [Lk.1:17] as the messenger to prepare the way for the Lord [Mt.11:10]; there have arisen none to equal the Baptist.

Fearlessly, he confronted an entire generation like a thunder clap from heaven against the sins of peasants, priests, and princes alike. None were exempt from his withering denunciations and demands for repentance; none, not even the king.

When Herod the tetrarch was reproved because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the wicked things which Herod had done, Herod also added this to them all: he locked John up in prison [Lk.3:19, 20].

And thus he descended into Herod's dark and dank dungeon. The blaze of heaven's light bursting from him was then plunged into blackness. Multitudes who once rejoiced in this burning lamp [Jn.5:35] thronged to him no more. The voice that cried in the wilderness was silenced behind the confines of cold castle stone.

John is alone. The heralded Messiah of the coming kingdom sends no greeting. Jesus the Christ makes no visit to his cell. No word of cheer reaches his ears.

He whom he faithfully testified of and announced remains

aloof while the wicked king he faithfully testified to abides an afflicting captor. The One that John's whole life had been prepared for and was devoted to does nothing, says nothing.

Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another? [Mt.11:3]. Multiplied anxious thoughts race through fevered imaginations in Herod's dungeon. "The kingdom of heaven was at hand, yet Herod's wicked scepter still holds sway. How is it that the Bridegroom can abandon His friend who rejoiced to hear His voice? [Jn.3:29]. Surely He has come to set the captives free! [Isa.61:1]. Why does He not come?"

And so it was that a deputation of disciples came to inquire of Christ on John's behalf. And thus did Christ respond.

At that very hour He cured many of diseases, afflictions, and evil spirits; and to many blind he gave sight. Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and tell John the things you have seen and heard: the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the gospel preached to them.

"And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me" [Lk.7:21-23].

Report what you have seen and heard. They saw that many, but not all, were healed. They heard those ancient prophecies of the blind, deaf, and lame being saved [Isa.35:3-6] and of the gospel being preached to the poor by the Lord's Anointed [Isa.61:1-3].

This is what they saw and heard. It was the message that they carried to the downcast in the dungeon. Jesus Himself did not come. The message of truth did. And John was left there with the Truth until his earthly race had run its course.

And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me. It is a blessed condition to not be offended when the Lord Jesus does not perform according to our expectation. We are blessed when His Word alone is sufficient to sustain us in the midst of distressing and grievous afflictions. Blessed are you when you trust what you know is true in

the unrelieved grimness of Herod's dungeon.

He was left alone to reflect on the fact that many were healed, but not all. It was the same Jesus who healed some and did not relieve others. He pondered those prophecies, both of which promised rescue from maladies and pointed to a coming day of vengeance.

That of the 35th of Isaiah promised that the weak and fearful-hearted will yet be visited by God and saved [v.4]. In the 61st chapter, not only is the gospel preached unto the poor, but the captives are liberated and the prison doors fly open [v.1].

They were cheering words to the downcast. But when shall they be realized? When will He come to this, my dungeon?

The fact is, that it may not be in this life at all that your distress is visited and relieved. Perhaps not until the day of vengeance will all of your woes, grievances, and injustices be rectified.

By faith the servants of the Most High escaped the edge of the sword [Heb.11:34]. By faith others, equally His servants, were put to death with that same sword [Heb.11:37].

Elijah was ushered into glory in a fiery chariot sent from above [2 K.2:11]. His faithful companion who possessed a double portion of his spirit, slowly expired in his sickness [2 K.13:14].

By the mercies of God Epaphroditus was healed of his deadly ailment [Phil.2:27]. But Paul's beloved co-worker was left sick at Miletus [2 Tim.4:20].

One of God's notable prophets was delivered and raised from a pit of certain destruction [Jer.38:4-14]. Yet the stalwart and fearless Micaiah was cast into prison and fed sparingly with the bread of affliction [I K.22:27].

In days of famine, one desolate widow was miraculously fed while others foraged about searching for crumbs. **Elijah was sent to none of them** [Lk.4:25, 26].

Black despair burst into light's glowing warmth in Herod's dismal prison-house of death. Fierce guards and flashing swords were

bypassed as if nothing by the liberated captive. Shackles and chains clinked powerless to the ground as Peter was escorted by his heaven-sent deliverer.

Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod [Acts 12:11]. These were the words of Peter.

This is the testimony of James. Then he [Herod] killed James the brother of John with the sword [Acts 12:1, 2]. They were in the same prison, bound by the same Herod, and serving the same Jesus.

Which Jesus do we want? The Jesus of Peter or the Jesus of James? Which Jesus will we love and serve? Which One will we not be offended with?

Will we presume to choose, or even demand, our own means of deliverance? For, truly, both Peter as well as James were set free from Herod's clutches, were they not?

Lonely vigils night and day passed in the Baptist's miserable cell in Herod's dungeon before he was released. The prisoner was eventually set free. The prison doors finally burst forth from their squalor into the brightness of eternal day. It was the Lord's doing.

At the malicious demand of Herod's wanton consort, he sent and had John beheaded in prison [Mt.14:10]. And thus the captive was set free by Herod's murderous sword, yet not even one hair of John's head perished [Lk.21:18].

And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me.

8

TRIED BY FIRE

BELOVED, DO NOT BE SURPRISED AT THE FIERY TRIAL AMONG YOU,
WHICH COMES UPON YOU FOR YOUR TESTING,
AS THOUGH SOME STRANGE THING WERE HAPPENING TO YOU
[I Pet.4:12]

If the Master is maligned as Beelzebub, the members of His house must fare even worse at the hands of men [Mt.10:25].
If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you [Jn.15:20].

There is nothing strange, then, about Peter and John being arrested and flogged [Acts 5:17, 18, 40] nor that Stephen was stoned to death [Acts 7:58]. It was the same high priest and council that had crucified their Lord that was responsible for their own afflictions.

Conformity to Christ's character necessarily results in partaking of His sufferings. The two are inseparable. **All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution** [2 Tim.3:12]. Fiery trials are therefore not a strange thing but follow expectedly as a consequence of godliness.

They arise from wicked men but are sent by the hand of God accompanied by the Spirit of glory and of God [I Pet.4:14]. We should not be ashamed to be reviled for the name of Christ and suffer for uprightness [I Pet.4:16]. Men may malign and mistreat while casting shame and slander upon the righteous. But it is no cause to be ashamed.

Rather, it is cause to glory [I Pet.4:16], to rejoice [Acts 5:41], and to be exceedingly glad [Mt.5:12]. Such response demands the

spiritual reality evident in a Paul who witnessed that he was **sorrowful, yet always rejoicing** [2 Cor.6:10]. Will fiery trial turn us from the appointed path?

Skin for skin, yea, all that a man has will he give for his life [Job 2:4]. So says the adversary. What say you? What said three young Hebrew men?

Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace...but if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods... [Dan.3:17, 18].

He is able...but if not...we will not. Their devotion did not depend upon deliverance. Rescued or no, to them, God must be honored, truth upheld, and faith rest unwavering. This is the unyielding allegiance of true consecration.

God is to be glorified as God without rival or compromise though self perish in the process. All of the workings of truth flow to this end. It is why we are tried by fire.

It is why we exult in our tribulations. They produce perseverance and that tested character which issues in hope [Rom.5:3-5]. The godly quality of life resulting from enduring afflictions lends confidence to the soul of its eventual conformity to Christ's image.

That is hope; a hope born in the fire and fanned into a flame of light by the winds of adversity. It is truth and righteousness upheld that are the provocations to heat the furnace seven times hotter and cast the godly therein.

Fiery trials ensue when we are unashamed of Christ and His words in the midst of a sinful and adulterous generation [Mk.8:38]. This, no Nebuchadnezzar can endure.

Cains will arise against the Abels of the land. Pharaohs will increase their afflictions upon the Israel of God who refuse to compromise divine decrees. Testifying the good confession before the Pilates of this world ushers one to Golgotha's brow, while craftsmen of Diana's shrines riot against gospel light.

Suffering for the sake of truth embraced is the portion of the godly in all generations [2 Tim.3:12]. Moses chose to suffer affliction with the people of God...esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasure in Egypt [Heb.11:25, 26].

Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection [Heb.11:35]. Time would fail us to recount the histories of the men whom, valiant for truth, the world was not worthy of [Heb.11:36-38].

Suffice it to say that Paul kept the faith [2 Tim.4:7]. Peter and Apostles must obey God rather than men [Acts 5:29]. John partook of tribulation on Patmos' Isle because of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus [Rev.1:9]. And our Lord Jesus despised the shame and endured a cross for the joy set before Him [Heb.12:2].

Love of truth issues in salvation of those who embrace it [2 Thess.2:10]. At the same time, though, it also issues in persecution from those who love it not [Jn.15:19].

But something happens when we stand stalwart and immovable. The world rises up in haste when it sees One like the Son of God with us in the flames [Dan.3:24, 25].

A testimony is established in the furnace. But we must not shrink from the fire if we would have Christ meet us therein. It is there that it becomes evident to all that it is God, and not self, that we serve.

Brethren, don't be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you which comes upon you for your testing. It is no strange thing. Suffering is our expected portion in this world, but Christ will be with us if we stand erect when Babylon's notes compel our prostration.

9

SUFFERINGS ENDED

THE FIRST THINGS HAVE PASSED AWAY [Rev.21:4]

For in this we groan [2 Cor.5:2]. The body, in time, here on earth, is our present house of sorrow. Here, while the inner man is renewed day by day, the outer man perishes [2 Cor.4:16]. Tears become our food here by day and by night [Ps.42:3], yet they are all, each one, recorded in His book [Ps.56:8].

There are no wasted sufferings in the economy of God. Sorrows for a season effect eternal comforts for suffering saints. **In faithfulness You have afflicted me** [Ps.119:75]. Can you say so? **It was good for me that I was afflicted** [Ps.119:71]. Is this your testimony?

When standing on eternal shores, it certainly will be. When seen from the standpoint of an All-Wise Sovereign, you will say so. If our trust in His kindly wisdom were but more simple, we would say so now.

Should we for a moment be granted all-knowledge with all wisdom to discern, along with all-power to effect any change that wisdom perceived, we should choose for ourselves precisely the circumstance that we find ourselves in at the moment. We would realize that these very afflictions are the best possible situation for our eternal well-being.

This is what God, the All-Wise, the All-Powerful, has done. No better situation than your present sorrow could possibly be imagined in the process of securing conformity to the likeness of

Christ. It is true. And, **After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you** [I Pet.5:10].

He is yet on the throne, a throne from which He makes all things new [Rev.21:5]. All things new; the process begins now, in the heart, in the renewal of the inner man day by day.

Through the dreaded and seeming unrelenting afflictions of life, the Lord's design is to remake all things; and He begins with our hearts. The outward, the physical, the temporal will follow in due course. That portion of external discomforts and sorrows removed will only fully be realized in the coming final Day.

It is only then that every tear will be wiped away. Some may be wiped dry here, but many will yet stain our cheeks. Only in that place will there be no death, mourning, or pain [Rev.21:4]. These are the first things which necessarily afflict before being banished.

Pain precedes pleasure. Rejoicing follows mourning. Death snatches its victim ere God raises His victor. Yes, sorrows abide for a season below, but the Word is sure, faithful, and true: **It is done!** [Rev.21:5,6].

Sweating brows toiling and limp beneath a blazing sun's curse will yet be led to springing refreshing fountains of life [Rev.7:16,17; 21:6]. Overspread is Almighty's shade under which no pangs of lack or tormenting thorns can abide [Rev.7:15-17].

He who overcomes will inherit these things [Rev.21:7]; **an inheritance imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ** [I Pet.1:4-7].

Yes, it is for him who overcomes. All have something to overcome in this world by faith in the Son of God [I Jn.5:4,5]; suffering's distressing spectrum in a sin-cursed world, repulsive temptations from the subtle serpent, and threats of one's own lust to erupt and spew forth its venomous defilements. We must overcome.

There exists only one horrid option; the lake that burns with fire and brimstone. The cowardly who flee sufferings for Christ here will plunge headlong into torments unending in that Day [Rev 21:8]. Those who refuse to account God as true on earth will have the gnawing worm's conscience reminding them of that reality throughout all eternity.

But let us not linger here amid the smoking groans of the damned. **Come here, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb** [Rev.21:9]. Can you see her, brilliant and blissful, honored among ten thousands of the choicest souls of the ages? Behold her, linen wrapped, bright and blameless [Rev.19:7-9]. Gaze at her glittering virtuous crown glorifying her Beloved [Prov.12:4].

Do you hear the thunderous swelling notes resounding in cloudless eternal skies? **Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready** [Rev.19:7].

Yes, she has made herself ready. The Day has dawned and the Lamb receives her as His own. And now at His **right hand stands the queen in gold...**

Listen, O daughter, give attention and incline your ear: Forget your people and your father's house; then the King will desire your beauty...She will be led to the King in embroidered work...with gladness and rejoicing;

They shall enter the King's palace [Ps.45:10-15].