

UPWARD CALL

Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but this is my one aim: to forget everything that's behind, and to strain every nerve to go after what lies ahead. I press on toward the finish line, where the prize waiting for me is the upward call of God
IN KING JESUS.

(Philippians 3:13-14)

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Through Many Tribulations—Entering the Reign

"It continues binding and necessary for us to enter into the reign of God (or: God's kingdom) through the midst of many pressures, squeezings, tribulations and afflictions (or: because of many oppressions)." (Acts 14:22 JM-NT)

Have you ever lamented over why it is that Christians who desire to go on in the Lord and to please Him, and to do His will, seem to have such a hard time and are suffering in these days. We go through times of trial and we think that things will get better, only to discover that once we come through one trial, there is another one right on its heels. We see others around us doing certain legitimate things of life, and it seems to go well for them. Yet, we attempt to do the same things, and it seems like we are trying to push a bolder up a steep hill. It seems like the world looks at us and declares: *You're all crazy fools!*

We recently received a letter from a beloved brother in Christ who loves the Lord and desires nothing more than to serve the Lord and help people grow to love the Lord with their whole heart, and yet, he has no food on the table to feed his family or money to send his children to school. Why must it be this way?

Let us not be like Job's friends to our brethren who might be in very severe trials. Unfortunately, some Christians of certain emphasis would say: "Well, brother; you lack faith. You need more faith." Others might say: "You're in a spiritual battle; you need to fight the devil. You need to put on the whole armor of God and fight the good fight." In line with this, others might say: "You need to pray more, even without ceasing." No doubt we need faith, we need to fight the good fight, and we need to pray, but these do not answer the groaning within of why it is so difficult so often. Why must it be this way for those who love the Lord, especially when all these things are operative in their lives?

We know a family who loves the Lord and they have a severely challenged 16-year old who requires watchful monitoring and care 24/7. They have little help caring for their son, often leaving them emotionally and physically exhausted. Why must it be this way? We know a couple who lost their daughter to a gunman who ravaged a college campus. This family dearly loves the Lord, and their only daughter loved Jesus and was following Him. Their loss cannot be expressed in words. Why must it be this way? Or, consider the innumerable martyrs for the cause of Christ over the last two millennia whose blood cries out like that of Abel's shed blood. Why must it be this way?

I have no doubt that if you have been in the Lord for a while that you have had a cry in your heart: *Why?* Perhaps deep down you think it but are afraid to verbalize it to the Lord Jesus for fear that He will send a lightning bolt and wipe you out. Don't be so superstitious! Be open and honest! The Lord knows your heart and is never put off by what you are thinking or even saying out loud to Him. We need to be honest with the Lord and open our heart to Him in whatever way expresses the groan, the question or the complaint within us. I have a very dear friend with a sensitive heart for the Lord who, when his trials and sufferings become almost unbearable, speaks to the Lord in terms that would challenge some, but do you know what happens? The Lord meets him and answers him in special ways. The Lord knows how to meet us, most of all in our moments of despair.

Personally, when I am in my groaning mode, I turn to Jeremiah and read his complaint to the Lord. Here was one who was doing the Lord's will, and yet, all he encountered was severe trial and anguish of soul. *O LORD, thou hast deceived me, and I was deceived: thou art stronger than I, and hast prevailed: I am in derision daily, every one mocketh me* (Jeremiah 20:7). Jeremiah even purposed not to mention the Lord again or speak in His name anymore, but His word burned in his heart, and he could not keep quiet. Reading Jeremiah, I sense a man whose soul was like a pendulum going from one emotional extreme to another. *Sing unto the LORD, praise ye the LORD: for he hath delivered the soul of the poor from the hand of evildoers. Cursed be the day wherein I was born: let not the day wherein my mother bore me be blessed* (Jeremiah 20:13-14 KJV).

Well, for all who love the Lord Jesus and who are groaning, even complaining to the Lord, take heart; there is a reason behind the afflictions of all who love God and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28). Paul, the afflicted apostle who knew many tribulations, gives us the answer.

After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, "Through many tribulations [*thlipsis*] we must enter the kingdom of God." (Acts 14:21-22 NASB)

The word *tribulation* comes from the Greek word *thlipsis*, which means "pressure (literately or figuratively): afflicted, anguish, burdened, persecution, tribulation, trouble."

Jesus said: In the world you have affliction [*thlipsis*] (John 16:33). Paul called it momentary, light affliction [*thlipsis*] (2 Corinthians 4:17). John was exiled to Patmos as a partner in the affliction [*thlipsis*] (Revelation 1:9). Another way of summing up these verses is that in the world, you have pressure. However, often times it does not seem to be momentary and light; rather, it feels like a never-ending pressure cooker that won't release you until you are well-done.

Why do the Lord's people have to be pressurized like this? The reason for all the suffering, the afflictions, the trials, and the tribulations is so that we will be counted worthy to enter the coming kingdom (reign) of God in which Christ will reign over this earth and sum up all in the heavens and on the earth. I often turn to Paul's exhortation and encouragement to the ecclesia of the Thessalonians: ***So that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory*** (1 Thessalonians 2:12). Another translation reads: ***God who is inviting you to share His own Kingship and glory*** (WNT).

Those who conquer (overcome) through Christ while in their bodies of death will be counted worthy to enter the coming kingdom to reign with Christ. The pressure of this world is designed to form Christ in us, to make us into precious, living stones in the spiritual house of God, the dwelling of God *in* spirit (see Ephesians 2:22; 1 Peter 2:5). All who believe on Jesus are temples of God (1 Corinthians 3:16), being joined together into New Jerusalem (Hebrews 12:22). In the physical realm, magma (molten rock) is transformed into precious gems over many years under great pressure, temperature, and upheaval of this earth; likewise, in the spiritual realm, precious stones are being formed under often intense pressure from the world, even during great upheaval of the world system in which we live. God is the great gemologist, and He is forming His spiritual house, a holy temple in the Lord, through the pressures of life, the many trials, afflictions, and sufferings. Notice that Paul declared that there are many tribulations; we must expect many. So, when we are being pressurized, and as we cry out to the Lord, perhaps even in complaint and demand to know why, let us remember that it is through many tribulations or pressures, we must enter the kingdom of God. King Jesus is coming. Let us not forsake the pressures but embrace them.