

Before email or text messaging, James and I grew to know and love each other through letter writing. The day came when James decided that it was time to visit. While we had been previously introduced, this would be the first time in each other’s presence having serious intentions. Driving away from the airport after picking him up I took a swig from my water bottle. Offering the bottle to him I asked, **“Are you thirsty?”** At that point, he tells me now, all hope rose within him. A woman does not give her cup to just anyone.

In ancient times, the man who was willing to drink from the same cup as the king was the cupbearer. As an officer of high rank in royal courts, the cupbearer not only served drink to the ruler, but would ensure its safety, protecting the sovereign from any attempt at poisoning him by drinking from the same cup. On account of the constant fear of plots and intrigues, a person must be regarded as thoroughly trustworthy to hold this position. Drinking from the same cup in eastern custom indicated that here was a man willing to die for the ruler.

At a wedding, two drinking from the same cup indicates their level of intimacy.

Jesus spoke of a cup that he would share with His followers. The first time He mentions this cup is to James, John, and their mother. They had approached Jesus requesting “closest-to-you-in-your-kingdom” positions where they would sit on the right and left side of his throne. Jesus responds, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” (Matthew 20:22, NASB). Only those who will drink from My cup will be near me in My kingdom. What strange words.

Just before this encounter, Jesus had shared with James, John, and the other disciples His future suffering. “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, and deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify” (Matthew 20:18-19, NKJV). But the disciples did not understand. As followers of any leader, their eyes were set on glory.

It was the reality of His suffering that Jesus was alluding to when He spoke of the cup. It was His portion. To follow Him was to pursue a man carrying a cross. “Are you able to do that?” He asked. “We are able,” they naively answered. They would drink of the same cup. James was the first of Jesus’ followers to feel the sword. John endured persecution the longest. Their request was answered. No obvious token of a heavenly position of glory did they receive, but I doubt that mattered to them at the end of their lives. The purified desire for closeness with the Savior was granted. They were both brought into greater intimacy with Christ through fellowship with Him in suffering.

Peter also had this lesson to learn. So strong was his aversion to suffering that after Jesus explained what He must experience, Peter took Jesus aside and rebuked Him. ““Never Lord!’ he said. ‘This shall never happen to You.’” Jesus



answered, “Get behind Me Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me.” Get out of the way Satan! No longer come between Peter and Myself. Peter’s attitude towards suffering was preventing the closeness Jesus longed for. When cleansing the temple, Jesus spoke with similar passion. As He chased the retailers out, overthrew tables, aggressively removing what was coming between Him and the true worship of the people, unleashing Himself on the obstruction, He cried, “Take these things out of the way!”

Did Peter understand the rebuke? Was he ever able to understand the path of suffering? Look at what he wrote years later. “It is thankworthy...if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God...if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps” (1 Peter 2:19-21, NKJV, NIV). To endure suffering with dignity is thankworthy. God is thankful when, instead of buckling or living with a victim mentality, or blaming Him and shaking the fist as if He was the source of the pain, we choose to allow suffering to draw us closer to Him.

“Since Christ suffered in His body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude.... Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial ... but rejoice ... as ye are partakers of Christ’s sufferings” (1 Peter 4:1, 12-13, NKJV, KJV).

A partaker simply means a sharer, a fellow, a partner, a comrade. The quest of those who come to love God becomes this: “That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings” (Philippians 3:10, NKJV). Why would they seek this kind of fellowship?

Suffering is a very vulnerable, narrow place. We don’t tell just anyone our deepest experiences of pain, especially when we are in the midst of it. We often tend to bear it alone. Others cannot fully understand. They may not validate the intensity of the pain. They may say something callous or cast blame. But those who do suffer with us reach a level of transparent friendship that is deeper than all other relationships.

Peter also wrote: “If anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this” (1 Peter 4:16, NKJV). Tragically, this world is full of

suffering. We can’t live here and escape it. We suffer the bitter consequences of our decisions and irretrievable mistakes. We also suffer what is unfair and wrong. Yet, over and over again, Scripture says that God is just. In other words, He is fair. Believing in His fairness, in contrast to the world’s injustice, provides strength to endure and live unashamed, knowing that someday He will make it right. While His love and power cannot yet put an end to all the suffering, it enables a man or woman to be hit hard and get back up again, to experience the darkness of the tunnel and still believe in the light, to have the precious taken away and yet know that it will be restored. God is glorified by those who, in spite of everything, trust. Christ enables all who drink from His cup to ultimately triumph over affliction.

There lived a man who experienced this in reality. His name was John the Baptist. While called the greatest of all the prophets, he was stripped of his usefulness prematurely. Because of standing for right, he found himself rotting in jail, tortured in spirit, battling the whispering of demons: God has forsaken you. If this man is the Messiah, if He is good, then why isn’t He delivering you from suffering? How could He allow this to happen to you? Seeking psychological calm, mental guidance, and help to cope, he sent his friends to Jesus. Through them Jesus gave John what he needed, a revelation of the true nature of His kingdom. He would bring all suffering and injustice to an end. But first He must win the hearts of Satan’s victims through a revelation of the self-sacrificing love of God, a love that was willing to suffer for them. John saw that Jesus’ mission could win from the nation’s leaders only hatred and condemnation. As John had paved the way for Christ’s ministry, introducing Him to the masses, he realized he was but drinking of the cup that Christ Himself must drain to the last drop. And with this John surrendered himself to God for life or for death, as should best serve the interests of the cause he loved. John the Baptist realized that he was sharing in something bigger than himself. It became an honor for him to become a partaker.

When we understand that we are suffering with the One who loves us above all others; that He is with us and nothing shall separate us from His love; that trials will only bring us closer to our suffering Savior, then the bitter can become sweet.



“O Israel, fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; you are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned” (Isaiah 43:1-2, NKJV).

I will be with you. When you love someone being with them is the dominant desire. “The Lord is near unto them that are of a broken heart” (Psalm 34:18, NKJV).

The waters shall not overflow you. Have you ever seen surfers riding monstrous tsunami-size waves? Comparable to jumping off a cliff, they courageously drop onto nearly 100-foot swells. The wave begins to curl and then crash. For a moment the surfer is hidden. He has been riding the tube and now is sliding out of the tunnel. Then it appears that the whole wave has crashed and again he is lost to sight. The waters must have “overflowed him.” But no, out of the mountains of mist and spray a speck appears. He is in front of that wave! He is still standing!

Surfer Dave Kalama describes surfing such waves, being next to that much raw power, as a spiritual experience. “A wave,” he says, “is essentially energy passing through the ocean until it breaks and disperses. To be that close to that much energy being released can be **humbling**.”¹ We too will be humbled and awed as we draw near to the power and energy of God. To be close is what we desire. And yet, waiting for all seekers is an antagonistic power, attempting [in any way he can] to prevent such intimacy. The same efforts he used to destroy Christ’s relationship with the Father, he will use on us.

“For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for His sake” (Philippians 1:29). Does that mean we are to passively accept suffering as a part of life? Absolutely not. The Bible also says, “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour [through temptation, trials, and suffering]. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings” (1 Peter 5:9, NIV, emphasis added).

Resist. Fight it. The call is to do whatever we can to alleviate suffering, not only in our own lives but in the lives of all of our brothers and sisters throughout the world who are suffering as well.

“And the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will Himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast” (1 Peter 5:10, NIV). After you have endured you will be immovable. Strong, firm, steadfast will be your relationship with Christ.

The reason you are experiencing pain is because this world is not worthy of you (Hebrews 11:38). In dealing with the pain remember that you have options. You can numb the pain with a chemical of choice. You can blame yourself until you are good for nothing. You can grow angry and bitter which will result in the decaying of your soul. You can grow apathetic and icy, stuffing the pain in a corner, and therefore be less of who you really are. Or you can discover a level of intimacy with a Companion and Friend like no other. He will meet you in the darkness and gently lead you back out to the light. There will come a day when you will look back and “Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, *when you stood your ground* in a great contest in the face of suffering” (Hebrews 10:32-37, NIV, emphasis added).

In his recitation of his experience in the Auschwitz Nazi prison camp, Viktor Frankl remembers his days of suffering and writes, “When a man finds that it is his destiny to suffer, he will have to accept his suffering as his task; his single and unique task.... His unique opportunity lies in the way in which he bears his burden.... Suffering had become a task on which we did not want to turn our backs. We had realized its hidden opportunities ... ”²

How you bear your suffering depends upon where you focus at such times. Too often we tightly shut our eyes waiting for the bad part to pass. But if we will keep them open, groping in the darkness after Him, searching for His provision during such times, He has promised that He will be found of us. We will find Him near, very near, drinking from the same cup.

1. Davis, Nicole. “Surfing into Jaws.” *Adventure Magazine*. Jul. 2002. http://www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure/0207/q_n_a.html.

2. Frankl, Viktor. *Man’s Search for Meaning*. New York: Pocket Books, 1984. pp. 97-98.



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In Pursuit of Intimacy



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Drinking From the *Same* Cup