

“I saw him in church for the first time,” wrote an author. His new suit complimented his neatly combed hair. I had invited him to church many times. But he was never interested. Not that he was a bad man. He was highly respected in town. He was honest. He was generous. But he wasn’t interested in Christianity. Once, when a special service was coming up, I asked him to come. When he turned me down yet again, I asked him why he would not accept my invitation. With the pain still showing in his eyes, he told me about an experience 70 years earlier.

He was the youngest of seven children, he said. With so many mouths to feed, his father struggled to put food on the table, no less provide fancy housing or flashy clothing. When he was ten, another child invited him to Sunday School. He loved it. He had never heard songs of such joy. Then he stayed for the worship service, where the pastor explained how God loved him so much He had taken on human flesh and died for him. By the third week, he was ready to pray what his Sunday School teacher called “the sinner’s prayer.”

“So what made you stop going?” the author asked. “Well,” the man said, “on the fourth week, in between Sunday School and the worship service, a man took me aside.” “Son,” he said, “don’t come to church dressed that way again. We want to look our best to worship God.” His ragged overalls were all he had, however. And the oversized shoes he was wearing belonged to an older brother. He was just borrowing them for the day. “No sir,” he said with a quivering lip, “I won’t come to church dressed this way again.” And he never did. Not for 70 years. “Now, as I saw him,” the author wrote, “dressed in a suit and tie, and lying in his casket, I couldn’t help but think back to that little boy. And as I did, I could hear his anguished voice saying, ‘No sir, I won’t come to church this way again,’ . . . and I wept.”

Eons ago, God created Adam and Eve. He placed them in the midst of a beautiful garden. He gave them everything they needed to be full of joy and peace. But LIKE US, Adam and Eve were not gods. LIKE US, they were finite creatures who depended on God for the very breath of life. And JUST LIKE US, Adam and Eve struggled with the temptation to turn away from God’s way of doing things. This is because JUST LIKE US, Adam and Eve thought they could do it on their own. But they were wrong! And the joy and peace were replaced by pain, suffering, and death. But God did not give up! God began to work to undo what Adam and Eve had done, and to restore humanity to a life that was free of the repercussions of their sinful actions.

In the passage from Isaiah, we heard how God promised that one day He would bring what He was doing to fulfillment by sending a being who would take upon himself the suffering humanity had created. He would bear “our infirmities,” and “carry our sorrows.” He would be “pierced for our transgressions,” and “crushed for our iniquities.” And he would do so, Isaiah said, so that by taking upon himself our “punishment” we might be “made whole,” and by taking upon himself our “wounds” we might be “healed.” We see that happen in the events of Matthew 27.

2,000 years later, the fullness of what Jesus wished to accomplish in what He did in what Matthew 27 describes has still not brought about God’s will “on earth as it is in heaven.” The symbol of the whip not only reminds us of this reality, it also calls us to consider another approach to the ways we are tempted to live in our fallen and sinful state. This is because Jesus willingly chose to suffer

under the lashes of that whip so He might deliver us of all that causes us to suffer. He chose to allow Himself to be wounded by that whip so He might cure us from all that wounds us. And He allowed Himself to be hurt by that whip so we He might heal us of all that afflicts us. But none of that will happen magically. We must work with God to bring it about, and that work involves us being willing to offer up sacrifices of suffering just like Jesus.

One way we offer a sacrifice of suffering is by seeking God. In 2 Chronicles 7, God promises “*if my people . . . will humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and forgive their sin and heal their land.*” In 2 Chronicles 15, we are promised “*If you seek him, he will be found by you.*” And in Matthew, Jesus says “*seek first His kingdom and his righteousness,*” and everything else will fall into place. The reason is that it is impossible to be healed by a God we do not know. For if we don’t know God, we won’t understand His ways of healing. And if we don’t understand His ways of healing, we can’t work with Him to bring about that healing in our lives. But if we seek God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, God can bring about all that He has promised. Doing this can be a sacrifice for us however. For it can feel like we are suffering as we “*lay down our lives*” to choose God’s ways over the ways we are tempted to live instead.

We also offer a sacrifice of suffering by serving God. Deuteronomy 10 asks “*what does the Lord require?*” and answers “*fear the Lord your God, walk in all his ways, love him, and serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul.*” Joshua 22 says, “*Take care to observe the commandments and instructions that Moses [gave] you: love the Lord your God, walk in his ways, hold fast to him, and serve him with all your heart and soul.*” And in Matthew 16, Jesus says “*No one can serve two masters; they will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other.*” This is because we cannot find healing as long as our eyes are focused on the mirror instead of the Divine Physician. We see this in the gospel of Matthew where we are told that Peter tried to walk on the water, but began to sink because He took his eyes off Jesus. Doing this can be a sacrifice for us however. For it can feel like we are suffering as we “*lay down our lives*” to serve God rather than ourselves.

Finally, we offer a sacrifice of suffering by sharing God. We see this in the Great Commission: “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.*” We see it when Jesus said “*The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest . . . to send out workers.*” And we see it in 1 Peter, when the apostle says “*you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*” This is because while God loves each of us, and wills the best for us as if we were the only person on earth, we are NOT the only person on earth, and God loves every one of those OTHER people just as much as He loves us. Thus, when God heals us, it is not just so WE ALONE might be healed, but so OTHERS might also see our healing, and turn to God and be healed themselves. Doing this can be a sacrifice for us however. For it can feel like we are suffering as we “*lay down our lives*” to share God rather than hoard His love.

In The Purpose Driven Life: What am I here for?, we see how all this relates to the symbol of the whip. In that book, Rick Warren says that things like seeking God, serving God, and sharing God

will require a change in priorities for most of us. This is because living in such ways often means making the decision to re-prioritize our lives, re-schedule our days, re-develop our relationships, and re-organize the things our lives are centered around. Sometimes this will mean choosing a more difficult path than the one we want to travel. Sometimes this will mean letting go of good things so we can take hold of better things. And sometimes this will mean letting go of this life so we can fully take hold of eternal life.

But because we are human, we struggle with making such choices, and feel like that struggling is suffering. Even Jesus was not exempt from this reality. Knowing he would soon be crucified, Jesus cried out to the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane *“my soul has become troubled; and what am I to say, ‘Father save me from this hour?’”* For He had to choose between doing what His Heavenly Father wanted, and fulfilling His own desires. And that struggle, that suffering, was so great that Luke tells us it led to Him sweating drops of blood. Fortunately, Jesus chose - despite the struggle and suffering - to do His Father’s will. To be His disciples, and receive His healing, He calls us to follow His example. He calls us to *“pick up our cross daily,”* and *“deny ourselves,”* and follow Him, for only in that way will the suffering we experience be redeemed into something good. This is why Peter writes *“do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when His glory is [finally] revealed.”*

We see how this can work out however in a worship service that occurred in a small church. As the pastor stepped to the pulpit to preach, he paused. Then he said that before he preached, he wanted to introduce a friend. An elderly then man rose, and faced the congregation. *“A father, his son, and his son’s friend went sailing,”* the man said. *“Without warning, a storm blew in, and whipped up the waves. Despite being an experienced sailor, the father couldn’t control of the boat, and they were swept away when the boat capsized.”*

Taking a pause, the man noticed two teenagers who - for the first time in the service - were paying attention. Looking at them, he went on, *“Grabbing a rescue line, the father had to make the most excruciating decision of his life: to which boy would he throw the other end of the line. He only had a second to make his decision however. The father knew his son was a Christian, and his son’s friend was not. The agony of his decision could not be matched by even the torrent of the waves. But even so, the father yelled out ‘I love you, son,’ and threw the line to his son’s friend. By the time the father pulled the boy in, his son had disappeared beneath the waves.”*

By this time, the teenagers were anxiously waiting to hear what the man would say next. *“The father,”* the man said as he came to the end of his story, *“knew his son would step into eternity to be with Jesus, but he could not bear the thought of his son’s friend stepping into eternity without any hope of doing the same. So he sacrificed his son to save his son’s friend. How great the love of God that He should do the same for us. Our heavenly father sacrificed His Only Begotten Son so we could be saved. I urge you to accept His offer of rescue, and take hold of the life line He is throwing you this day.”* Then the man sat down.

After the service, the teens approached the man. *“That was just a story,”* one said, *“I don’t think a*

*father would sacrifice his son's in the hope his son's friend would become a Christian.” “Well you've got a point there,” the man said, “it isn't realistic to expect a man to be willing to suffer that kind of pain in the hope that God would use his pain to heal someone else.” But then, after breaking out in a smile, the man added, “but I'm here today to tell you that the story I told gives me a glimpse of what it must have been like for God to allow His Son to suffer for me, for I was that father, and your pastor was my son's friend.”*

While it is unlikely God may ever ask us to endure that level of sacrificial suffering, God does call us to be willing to offer up a sacrifice of suffering in other ways. God calls us to be willing to suffer through learning how to lay down our pride, ambitions, and tendency to have an opinion about everything. God calls us to be willing to suffer through learning how to lay down our selfishness, self-centeredness, and self-obsession. And God calls us to be willing to suffer through learning how to truly be holy, righteous, and loving when such things are not always naturally the ways we are prodded to live by our sinful souls.

This is because while the door to salvation was opened wide by the willingness of Jesus to offer a the sacrifice of suffering by being not only whipped but also crucified on the cross, we are only able to receive salvation when we offer up the sacrifice of suffering by choosing to “*lay down*” our lives and “*pick up our cross*” as Jesus demanded.