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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 12.12 – The Doctrine of Sanctification

The Crosses of Christians

We know from God's Word that our Christian life in this world will not be easy. There are times of relative calm when God sends earthly blessings in abundance to His beloved children on earth. But there are other times when God in His love for His children sends them difficulties of various kinds to give them an opportunity to exercise their faith in His loving promises. God does not treat all His children in the same way. Some Christians are given heavy burdens, and other Christians are given lighter burdens. But all Christians are given some burdens.

The presence of sin in this world brings difficulties of various kinds to all human beings. Sometimes the word "cross" is used in a general sense to refer to any kind of suffering. But Jesus wants Christians to know that certain difficulties will happen to them just because they are Christians. These specific difficulties Jesus calls "crosses" because they come to Christians because of their connection to Christ and His cross. Jesus' cross is in a class by itself, for He was bearing all human sin and the guilt and punishment of all human sin; this culminated in His being forsaken by God on the cross. Nevertheless, each Christian has his own cross to bear, as he becomes a follower of Christ.

We now examine some of the many Bible passages that discuss the special crosses of Christians and how we should handle them. We need to keep in mind that as long as we are Christians – branches attached to Christ, the Vine – we are God's beloved children, and we are totally forgiven and declared fully righteous in the sight of our God. By faith in Jesus Christ we already have eternal life while we are still living in this world. The crosses God sends to us as Christians are not intended to destroy our faith in Christ but to strengthen it. Satan, however, attempts to use all such crosses for his own evil purposes; he is always trying to destroy our faith both in good times and in bad.

In His Sermon on the Mount Jesus assured His followers: **"Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you"** (Matthew 5:11-12). Notice that persecution comes to us for Jesus' sake, that is, because of our connection with Jesus. Therefore, it is something we should rejoice in, rather than complain about. And it means we are in the company of God's prophets, who also were persecuted for Christ's sake.

Jesus did not promise His disciples that His message that we speak would be accepted by all. On the contrary He said: **"You will be hated by all for My name's sake. ... If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more will they call those of his household!"** (Matthew 10:22, 25). Jesus told them that there would be times when they would have to choose between Jesus and their dearest friends and family on earth. He said: **"Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and a man's enemies will be those of his own household. He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me"** (Matthew 10:34-38). **"If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me"** (Matthew 16:24). **"Whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple"** (Luke 14:33).

It would be wrong for us to think that such crosses will be given only to those who are leaders among Christians, such as the twelve apostles and present-day pastors and teachers. The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy: **"All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution"** (2 Timothy 3:12). To his recent converts in Galatia Paul said: **"We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God"** (Acts 14:22).

The apostle Paul in particular experienced many dangers as he traveled throughout the Roman Empire proclaiming the Gospel of Christ. He gave the Christians in Corinth a listing of some of the major obstacles he faced as a missionary (2 Corinthians 11:23-33). Besides the persecutions he endured from Christ's enemies, Paul had some kind of physical problem he called **"a thorn in the flesh"** which he asked God to remove from him. When God denied his requests, Paul realized why God gave him this thorn. He wrote: **"Lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure"** (2 Corinthians 12:7). Because God had blessed Paul with such amazing revelations and visions, he was in danger of spiritual pride and needed that thorn to keep him humble and weak and in constant need of God's strength.

The Christians to whom the apostle Peter wrote his first letter were undergoing persecution of various kinds. Christian slaves, for example, were being treated harshly by their masters, and they were tempted to rebel against them. But Peter assured them that when they were punished wrongfully, they were following in the footsteps of Christ Himself: **"Servants, be submissive to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh. For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps"** (1 Peter 2:18-21).

Peter made the same point to all his readers when he wrote: **"Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings. ... If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you. ... If anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter"** (1 Peter 4:12-16).

It is not only Christians who suffer in this world. For His own purposes God sometimes sends or allows terrible tragedies to happen to those who do not believe in Him. We think of the ten plagues that God sent to the Egyptians and their Pharaoh when they refused to let their slaves, the Israelites, leave their land, as God demanded (Exodus 7-11). When such tragedies occur in our day, we usually do not know the specific purpose God has in mind. David simply states the fact: **"Their sorrows shall be multiplied who hasten after another god"** (Psalm 16:4). **"Many sorrows shall be to the wicked"** (Psalm 32:10). **"Evil shall slay the wicked, and those who hate the righteous will be condemned"** (Psalm 34:21). But the evils suffered by the unbelieving in this world are as nothing compared to the woes of eternal damnation. Jesus said: **"He who does not believe will be condemned"** (Mark 16:16). The apostle elaborates on what this means in his second letter to the Thessalonians: **"The Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes, in that Day"** (2 Thessalonians 1:7-10).

We need to be careful that we do not presume to judge those who are undergoing such tragedies as being more guilty than those who are spared such events. We need to remember what Jesus said in connection with two tragedies that occurred in His time: **"Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed**

them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:2-5). These tragedies, whenever and wherever they occur, are calls to repentance for all of us.

When Christians endure especially difficult problems, we must refrain from passing judgment on them also. When the godly man Job was struck by the horrible losses of his property and his ten children all in one day, and then shortly after that was given a terrible disease, his three friends drew the conclusion that Job must have been guilty of some secret sin for which God was punishing him. But Job's friends were wrong and cruel in their judgments. The book of Job takes us behind the scenes and shows us that through the struggles of Job God was showing Satan that Job was His loyal follower regardless of the evil that came upon him. It was God who allowed Satan to harm Job. **"The LORD said to Satan, 'Behold, all that he has is in your power, only do not lay a hand on his person'"** (Job 1:12). It was God who then allowed Satan to go even further. **"The LORD said to Satan, 'Behold, he is in your hand, but spare his life'"** (Job 2:6). Notice that Satan can only go as far as God allows in inflicting evil on God's children. God remains in total control.

The story of Job shows us that it is God who brings hardships of various kinds on Christians, although it is the devil and the unbelieving world that actually inflict the pain and anguish. Job recognized that it was God who was sending him all his troubles, and that was what troubled him the most. Job said: **"God has delivered me to the ungodly, and turned me over to the hands of the wicked. ... He has set me up for His target"** (Job 16:11-12). God spoke through His prophet Isaiah: **"I am the LORD, and there is no other; I form the light and create darkness. I make peace and create calamity; I, the LORD, do all these things"** (Isaiah 45:6-7). Christians do not believe in two equal deities, one good and one bad, but only in one Lord God, who controls all things.

Yet there is a struggle between God and Satan for the soul of every individual. On the night before His own death, Jesus said to Peter: **"Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren"** (Luke 22:31-32). Peter did disown his Master later that night, but he also repented of his sin and turned to Jesus for forgiveness, as Jesus had prayed. The apostle Paul warned the Christians in his care: **"Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall."** But then he went on to assure them: **"No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it"** (1 Corinthians 10:12-13).

The letter to the Hebrews compares God's chastening of His children with the discipline imposed by fathers on their children for their good. We read: **"If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? ... For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peace fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it"** (Hebrews 12:7-11).

It is God who sends crosses to His children. It is not for us Christians to impose crosses on our fellow-Christians, supposedly for their good. We are not wise enough to make such judgments. The apostle Paul condemned the false teachers in Colosse who promoted **"self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body"** (Colossians 2:23). Nor is it proper for us Christians to choose our own cross, such as punishing ourselves with starvation or excessive self-discipline, or deliberately inviting persecution or martyrdom. The apostle Paul escaped danger when he could; in one case he **"was let down in a basket through a window in the wall"** to escape from the governor in Damascus (2 Corinthians 11:33).

We Christians may ask God to deliver us from our crosses. Paul prayed for deliverance from his **"thorn in the flesh"** and God answered him by explaining why he had to keep it. Even Jesus prayed to be delivered from the cross in the Garden of Gethsemane. God answered His prayer by strengthening Him

for the ordeal without taking it away. On such occasions we should pray as Jesus did: **“Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done”** (Luke 22:42).

At times Christians are tempted to think that their crosses are punishment for some particular sin they have committed. At such times we need to remember that our sins have already been punished when Jesus suffered for them on the cross, and **“there is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus”** (Romans 8:1). God chastens us **“for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. ... It yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it”** (Hebrews 12:10-11). Instead of imagining that we are being punished for our sins, we rather ought to **“rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy”** (1 Peter 4:13). The apostles of the Lord had been **“beaten”** by the Jewish council, but when they were let go, **“they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name”** (Acts 5:40-41).

There is no link between certain sins and specific judgments. When Jesus and His disciples encountered a man blind from birth, they **“asked Him, saying, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him’”** (John 9:2-3). When Jesus’ friend Lazarus got sick and died, Jesus said: **“This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it”** (John 11:4). God has a reason and purpose for everything He does, but it is not for us to always know what His purpose and reason is. In a general way we can say with Paul: **“We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose”** (Romans 8:28).

In times of extreme suffering Christians are even tempted to doubt God’s love for them and perhaps even His entire revelation in the Bible. In His parable of the sower and the seed Jesus said that some seed **“fell on rock, and as soon as it sprang up, it withered away because it lacked moisture”** (Luke 8:6). Jesus explained this, saying: **“The ones on the rock are those, who when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away”** (Luke 8:13). This is not God’s purpose or intention, but it does happen. Satan loves nothing more than to attack a Christian when they are suffering and rob them of their faith in Christ. Satan tried to tempt Jesus when He was hungry after a forty-day fast (Matthew 4:2-3). The Christian is tempted to say with Jeremiah: **“Why do You forget us forever, and forsake us for so long a time?”** (Lamentations 5:20).

Psalms 37 and 73 contain the laments of believers who wonder why the ungodly have so much more prosperous and pleasant lives in this world than the godly. When we think of the trials that pursued David as he fled from King Saul, who wanted to kill him, we can understand why he was led to say: **“How long, O LORD? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?”** (Psalm 13:1). But in this same short psalm David concludes: **“I have trusted in Your mercy; my heart shall rejoice in Your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, because He has dealt bountifully with me”** (Psalm 13:5-6).

It is God’s ultimate salvation, that is, the forgiveness of sins and eternal life, that allows the Christian to rejoice in times of suffering and say with the prophet Habakkuk: **“Though the fig tree may not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines; though the labor of the olive may fail, and the fields yield no food; though the flock may be cut off from the field, and there be no herd in the stalls – yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation”** (Habakkuk 3:17-18).

After a long period of suffering God blessed Job with twice as much as he had in the beginning and even gave him ten more children (Job 42:12). But even if God does not bring our sufferings to an end in this world, He will compensate for our grief in this world with the joys of the hereafter. Paul said: **“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us”** (Romans 8:18). James wrote: **“Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to**

those who love Him” (James 1:12). The “salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” gives us reason to “greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials.” Think of what awaits those who cling to Jesus all the way to the end: “an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does 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” (1 Peter 1:4-6).

Questions

1. What is meant by the crosses that Christians must bear?
2. What is the difference between Christ’s cross and the Christian’s cross?
3. What does God intend to do through the crosses He sends us?
4. How does Satan attempt to use the crosses of Christians?
5. Prove from God’s Word that all Christians must bear a cross.
6. Why did God not remove Paul’s thorn in the flesh?
7. What is the difference between Christian crosses and the troubles that happen to all human beings?
8. What is the worst evil that can happen to any human being? Why?
9. What was wrong with the way Job’s friends were talking to him?
10. What temptations come to Christians when they are bearing their crosses?
11. How do we overcome such temptations?
12. What always remains the same no matter what Christians are experiencing?
13. How did Jesus’ apostles react to the crosses they had to bear?