

# The Pathos of Wisdom

An Essay on Wisdom and Suffering

John Stone



*The Pathos of Wisdom*

by John Stone

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Summitville, Ohio

USA

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Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN-- xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

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This essay is dedicated to my father,  
John Harold Stone, Jr.



*With much wisdom is much sorrow<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:18

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## Introduction

The preacher at my church starts every Sunday service breathlessly sympathizing with the saints who suffer difficulty large or small. You can almost see the tear in his eye.

Following this windy endeavor, my preacher pumps out a somber prayer beseeching God almighty to end the trials of all the good people posthaste. The man has his opening act down to a science. It is a wonder to behold.

My preacher is a bad shepherd. He leads the sheep astray. He obscures the wisdom of God from those Wisdom would exalt. This essay explains why.

## Chapter 1

### The Law of Wisdom and Suffering

My life has been hellish. At times. For long times. These fires of hell first ignited not long after reading these dazzling stanzas:

*“Acquire wisdom! Acquire understanding!  
Do not forget nor turn away from the words of  
my mouth.  
Do not forsake her, and she will guard you;  
Love her, and she will watch over you.*

*The beginning of wisdom is: Acquire wisdom;  
And with all your acquiring, get understanding.*

*Prize her, and she will exalt you;  
She will honor you if you embrace her.  
She will place on your head a garland of grace;  
She will present you with a crown of beauty”  
(Proverbs 4:5-9).*

And this:

*“How much better it is to get wisdom than gold!  
And to get understanding is to be chosen above  
silver” (Proverbs 16:16).*

These lines from antiquity make wisdom out to be the holy grail. I believed. Off I set like a knight errant. Sir Galahad had nothing on me. I pulled up stakes. Out I struck in search of wisdom.

If I could obtain wisdom, I would be richer than Bill Gates. I would be honored, exalted, and crowned with beauty eternal. What could excel that, I wondered. That adventure commenced more than half a lifetime ago. Age has not clouded the memory of that glistening day I sallied forth in search of the holy grail. I remember it.

I am dissatisfied with the ounce or two of nuggets thus far collected in my journeys. However much wisdom I gain, there never seems to be enough. I want more. I am traveling on, going further, digging deeper, searching for the mother lode. I will have it when my heart and mind continually agree. I remain some distance from that end.

Perfect agreement within, I learned, marks perfect union with the Creator. As for now conflict lives inside me. Parts of me want what they want. Other parts want what God wants.

There is a war within my soul. It's ugly. I press on to find enduring peace. God's shalom.

When I began my quest for wisdom I hadn't the foggiest notion that the pursuit thereof guarantees suffering. I also didn't know that if you look carefully around in the midst of your own suffering, at least a flake of shining wisdom can be found. That's the way it works. Wisdom is found in suffering. Perfect wisdom is found when the self-will is fully mortified.

Self-will is dogged, though. A hanger-on. If it has half-a breath, it fights tooth and nail against God's will. To say this differently, obtaining perfect wisdom within makes for perfect peace within the soul. I'm headed in that direction, slugging it out with my self-will every step of the way. Wisdom is found in suffering. That's the only place it is.

The intellectual Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn found wisdom while interned in Soviet Union labor camps.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *The Gulag Archipelago*; Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn; Harper & Row (1973)

Richard Wurmbrand, a pastor, found wisdom while being tortured in the prisons of Communist Romania.<sup>3</sup>

Moses, deliverer of Israel, found wisdom not after 40 years in Pharos' palace but after 40 years of tending God's cantankerous sheep in the desert wilds.<sup>4</sup>

Even the Son of Man "*learned obedience from the things which He suffered*" (Heb. 5:8). Being obedient to God's will means overcoming one's self-will. Jesus fought this battle. He understands my struggle.

Mind you, wisdom is not promised to those who suffer. Fools suffer and remain foolish. Rather, suffering is the price one pays for the golden chance to find wisdom. If you don't sit patiently in the fires of suffering and then sift through your ashes, you will not find it. And you will not have it.

Solzhenitsyn, Wurmbrand, Moses, Jesus—these sons of man, dug deep into their suffering and found it. They sifted through the

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<sup>3</sup> *Tortured for Christ*; Richard Wurmbrand; Voice of the Martyrs (1967).

<sup>4</sup> Acts 7:30-38

ashes of their life until they spied something gleaming in the dust. That's the way it works. You sit in the fires until some part of you burns up, and then like Indiana Jones you dig for wisdom's gold. Gold is in there every time, at least a flake of it. It always is.

Solomon sifted his ashes. Else this man in the know could not have told us this about wisdom, "*For with much wisdom is much sorrow; as knowledge increases, grief increases*" (Ecc. 1:18). We could call this Solomonic paradigm, "*The law of wisdom and suffering,*" or we might say, "*The pathos of wisdom is suffering.*" Both mean the same thing.

Whatever we call it, this spiritual law means that apart from suffering, wisdom cannot be had.<sup>5</sup>

A French thinker saw the law of wisdom and suffering from a different angle, observing candidly, "*Only a fool can be happy.*"<sup>6</sup> From a Biblical perspective, that Frenchman was spot on.

Don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying a wise man cannot enjoy happiness or that happiness

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16

<sup>6</sup> Marcellus Emants; *A Posthumous Confession* (1894)

is the antithesis of wisdom. The Frenchman may have implied that but not me. Happiness is a gift of God.<sup>7</sup> Laughter is good medicine (cf. Prov 17:22). Happiness, if she visits, should be savored even if *“in laughter the heart may be in pain, and the end of joy may be grief”* (Prov. 14:13).

What I am saying here is that every son of man who desires wisdom purchases it with sorrows. He wrestles his self-will, one day winning, one day losing, then he returns to the ring with every morning’s rise never sure how that day’s grappling will go. But he grapples. He presses on, trusting in God’s mercies. Searching for wisdom is like that. A daily battle.

I am saying that and I am saying this: Having wisdom is like having x-ray vision that peers through any disguise foolishness may pose. The man who observes foolishness beneath its countless posturing forms senses the injury it causes. Thus observing foolishness, he suffers. The man with wisdom suffers when he finds foolishness in himself. He suffers when foolishness plies its trade in others. The man

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<sup>7</sup> *“A Song of Ascents. When the Lord brought back the captive ones of Zion, We were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter And our tongue with joyful shouting; Then they said among the nations, ‘The Lord has done great things for them.’ The Lord has done great things for us; We are glad”* (Psa. 126:1-3).

with wisdom suffers because he sees the fruitless pain foolishness invites and multiplies.

Society's intellectuals advocate the avoidance of physical and moral suffering. These preachers of pain avoidance question God about suffering's cause and purpose. They may go so far as to deny God exists because pain exists, thus cementing their foolishness (Ps. 14:1). Today's intellectuals observe no benefit in suffering. Because of their blindness, they perceive no value in the Suffering Servant. If Jesus was God, they posture, then He was foolish to endure suffering. And if Jesus was foolish, they conclude, then He was not God. That's what they say. I heard them say it. Everyone with ears to hear, has heard them. Including you.

It is not just Judaism and Christianity that associate wisdom with suffering. The Greek playwright Aeschylus (c. 524-456 BC) in his tragedy, *Agamemnon*, expresses the law of wisdom and suffering almost thought for thought. Aeschylus wrote, "*He who learns must suffer, and even in our sleep, pain, which cannot forget, falls drop by drop upon the heart, until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.*" Maybe Aeschylus read



Solomon's proverbs at his local synagogue. It could have happened.

To be clear, I am not talking about worldly wisdom here. The letters "I.Q." and "Ph.D." do not factor into this equation. This essay makes no allusion to intellectual prowess or to powers of reason. The gifts that guide a man pleasantly through this world are "*foolishness before God*" (1 Cor. 3:19) even if gaining the cascading accolades of the black robed regiment.

The wisdom we're discussing here is so contrary to man's ways that it's usually despised by the men it would serve. A story along these lines is told by Solomon. Solomon told about a poor wise man who knew how to save his city from a powerful enemy, and so the city was saved. But afterwards not one of the poor man's fellow citizens thanked him for saving them. Solomon concludes his tale by explaining that while wisdom is better than strength, the wise will always be despised if they are poor. Nevertheless, it is better to hear the wise words of a poor man, says Solomon, than the shouts of a foolish king (Ecc. 9:13-18).

The carnal minded cannot comprehend true wisdom. True wisdom is otherworldly. It is made available by God for the glory of His sons through the law of wisdom and suffering (1 Cor 2:7). This spiritual law is understood by the spiritually minded, a qualification that excludes a swath of current Christian ‘thinkers.’ For example, I once read a Christian psychologist who hypothesized that Heman the Ezrahite was clinically depressed when he penned Psalm 88.<sup>8</sup> But I can’t fathom it. Sorrowful, afflicted, forsaken—yes, Heman was all that. But mentally disturbed? I am unconvinced.

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<sup>8</sup> Reference withheld.

## Chapter 2

### Heman the Ezrahite

Even if only one phrase in Heman's sole Biblical contribution might be considered sunny—the expression, “*O Lord, the God of my salvation,*” his work compares better to that of Solomon than with the doodles of the mentally ill.<sup>9</sup> No, for my money Psalm 88 isn't the scribbling of an unstable scribe. It's the opposite.

Heman's work is an oasis of affirmation for the man who finds he's sharing in the sufferings of Christ.<sup>10</sup> Heman's prose is the approving nod of heaven to the man assailing wisdom's heights. It's high-octane encouragement to the beleaguered believer pressing onwards. With each anguished line, Heman swings his sword against the fires of the hell he's suffering, and he will win. He has won. Heman sits exalted in heaven.

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<sup>9</sup> Psalm 88, Verse 1: “*O Lord, the God of my salvation, I have cried out by day and in the night before You.*”

<sup>10</sup> 1 Peter 4:13; Romans 8:17-18

By my count Heman crams 24 sorrows into his psalm's 18 short verses, alongside a healthy number of pleas to God for immediate relief. I understand his cries for help. Heman's list of troubles is Job-esque. I understand that too.

Like Job, Heman feels weak and forsaken (vs. 4-5), loathed by friends (v. 8), rejected by God and on the verge of death from his youth onwards (vs. 14-15). The anguish Heman expresses in his inky mud pie of mortal agony is as gritty as the handful of blood-soaked dirt that Jesus left behind after praying in the Garden of Gethsemane.<sup>11</sup> Throughout Psalm 88, Heman's grief is palpable. Like Jesus, Heman is fighting the good fight against a terrible foe. And like Jesus, come what may, he presses on.

Heman had to be exceptionally wise to write so knowingly about grief, for no fool can describe what happens to the man in the valley of the shadow of death. Fools will not walk there. A trek through that valley is reserved for those who will be wise. Accordingly the Scriptures depict Heman as atypically wise.

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<sup>11</sup> Luke 22:44: *“And being in agony He was praying very fervently; and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground.”*

Heman's wisdom is so great that the Bible uses the expansiveness of his gift as a benchmark for Solomon's, declaring as if hard to believe, that Solomon's wisdom surpassed even Heman's (1 Kings 4:31).<sup>12</sup> Maybe Solomon's sufferings came through all those women he stabled. Scholars have posited such.<sup>13</sup> So does a rabbi friend of mine. But back to Heman.

Heman was the king's seer (1 Ch. 25:4). He was present when David brought the Ark into Jerusalem (2 Ch. 5:12). He served as a prophetic musician, a Levite "*designated by name to give thanks to the Lord*" at the tabernacle (1 Ch. 25:1, 4; 16:40-42). To add to these accolades,

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<sup>12</sup> Scholars are divided as to whether the Heman of Psalm 88 and the Heman of 1 Kings 4:31 is one and the same. Some say the answer is unknowable, some say it's two men and some say there's only one Heman. This author subscribes to the 'one Heman' theory as does B.J.E. Van Noort. Van Noort offers a splendid solution to the question "How many Hemans?" in his article, *Who Was Heman's Father?* (2012; <http://www.contradictingbiblecontradictions.com/?p=1526>; viewed October 24, 2017). S. Michael Houdmann (*Who Was Heman the Ezrahite in the Psalms?*; <https://www.gotquestions.org/Heman-the-Ezrahite.html>; viewed October 24, 2017) and Nathan Albright also hold to the 'one and the same Heman' position (*Heman: Profile of a Godly Man* (2011); <https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2011/07/30/heman-profile-of-a-godly-man/>; viewed October 24, 2017.)

<sup>13</sup>

[https://biblehub.com/sermons/auth/rowland/the\\_downfall\\_of\\_solomon.htm](https://biblehub.com/sermons/auth/rowland/the_downfall_of_solomon.htm); viewed February 20, 2021

Heman had 14 sons (and 3 daughters) who assisted him in the chorus (1 Ch. 25:5-6).<sup>14</sup> Any casual observer of Heman's Biblical biography will conclude that his honors cannot possibly belong to a man who is mentally ill. Heman's long list of honorifics paints the picture of a man who like Moses and David and Jesus, endured suffering and found wisdom. It's not surprising that Heman's name implies faithfulness.<sup>15</sup> It takes great faith to endure great suffering.

Maybe Heman began his quest for wisdom when his grandfather Samuel sat him down one day and said something like this to the youth:

*“Acquire wisdom! Acquire understanding!  
Do not forget nor turn away from the words of  
my mouth.*

*Do not forsake her, and she will guard you;  
Love her, and she will watch over you.*

*The beginning of wisdom is: Acquire wisdom;  
And with all your acquiring, get understanding.*

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<sup>14</sup> Bible Hub: Heman;  
<http://biblehub.com/topical/h/heman.htm>; viewed 10/9/2017.

<sup>15</sup>“Heman meaning;” Abarim Biblical Name Vault;  
[http://www.abarim-  
publications.com/Meaning/Heman.html#.We8u\\_0yZPyw](http://www.abarim-publications.com/Meaning/Heman.html#.We8u_0yZPyw);  
viewed October 24, 2017.

*Prize her, and she will exalt you;  
She will honor you if you embrace her.  
She will place on your head a garland of grace;  
She will present you with a crown of beauty”  
(Proverbs 4:5-9).*

Then maybe old Samuel put his hand on the boy's shoulder, looked him square in the eye and let him in on the great secret: *“Wisdom is better than gold, and understanding is to be chosen above silver” (Pro. 16:16)*. If a conversation like this occurred, I wonder if the wizened Samuel mentioned the other ‘treasure’ found along the pathway of wisdom, that part of the upward trail where one becomes marked by sorrows and familiar with griefs; *“Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain” (Ecc. 1:18)*.

If Samuel did warn his grandson Heman of the hardships ahead, the warning couldn't have done much to dissuade the youth from his forthcoming pursuit. What man can comprehend the fullness of an agony he himself has not endured? Intellectual knowledge of suffering and experiential knowledge of suffering are birds of a different feather. Think about it. Head knowledge

engenders sympathy while the endurance of agony produces empathy.

Sympathy and empathy are not the same. The former is attested to by diplomas and titles, the latter by the brand-marks of Messiah burned into one's body and carved onto the soul (Gal. 6:17). It's one thing to philosophize about suffering, it's another thing to have endured it. It's one thing to discuss the sufferings of Christ. It's another thing to drag your own cross up Calvary's hill. *"And He was saying to them all, 'If anyone wants to come after Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow Me'" (Luke 9:23).*

Whatever motivated Heman to choose the way of wisdom is fun to imagine but ultimately inconsequential. The fact is that from an early age Heman pursued wisdom, and he proved determined to go the distance regardless the cost. And wisdom costs.

To go all the way with the Lord Jesus Christ is hard traveling. Gaining wisdom costs everything. But when everything is sacrificed, everything is gained. As the missionary Jim Elliot wrote before yielding his life for unreached natives in the jungles of South



America, *“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”*<sup>16</sup> What is more valuable than gaining wisdom? Wisdom is a name for God.

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<sup>16</sup> Jim Elliot’s diary entry, October 28, 1949. Elliot was murdered by the Ecuadorian natives he sought to evangelize in

## Chapter 3

### The Normality of Suffering

When Jesus prophesied that the world would hate those who follow Him, He simply rephrased the law of wisdom and suffering. *“If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you,”* Jesus promised (John 15:20). Because it’s wise to follow Jesus, those who follow Him necessarily *“fill up what is lacking in Messiah’s afflictions”* (Col. 1:24). Because desiring to live a godly life is wise, just desiring to be godly guarantees persecution (2 Tim. 3:12). There is no way around it. If you don’t believe me, try it. Set your heart to gain wisdom and see what happens.

Those who claim to live a godly life in Christ Jesus but never suffer, deceive themselves (Matt. 7:21-23). And Christians who strive to avoid suffering retard their potential in Christ. They minimize their destiny. Such Christians don’t forfeit their salvation, but they forego exaltation. They will not gain God. Suffering like Christ is normal Christianity. In fact, suffering is guaranteed for all those who truly follow the Lord Jesus Christ. Not that you’ll

hear that message in the church I attend. Or in many I have visited.

The Bible characterizes suffering as a benevolent gift from God (Phl. 1:29). The Bible says that those who suffer unjustly and patiently endure it, find favor with God (1 Pe. 2:19-21). Men who patiently endure unjust trials in this life, rule cities in the next (Is. 32:1; Luke 19:17). Those who act wisely in this world are exalted like Job in his latter days (Is. 52:13; 1 Pe. 4:13; Job 42:12). Importantly, being exalted by God does not equate with being saved. According the Scriptures, being saved and being exalted are two different things.

## Chapter 4

### Saved ≠ Exalted

While every Christian who is exalted is saved, not all those saved are exalted. This truth runs afoul of current groupthink. Such groupthink conflicts with the teachings of Jesus despite running rampant in the Church.

In Jesus' parable of the wise and foolish virgins, Jesus says all ten women have a place in the kingdom but only the wise ones enter the wedding banquet (Mt. 25:1-13). Read it. That's what Jesus says. The foolish virgins are in the kingdom of God but locked out of the wedding.

Conversely, the wise virgins suffered because they spent all they had on oil. Spending themselves completely on oil so they can have the Groom, they enter the wedding and are exalted. They get God. The five foolish virgins have a place in the kingdom but being foolish, they are not feted. They are not crowned with glory.

If you recall, when running out of oil, the foolish virgins are admonished by the wise to return to the marketplace and spend themselves completely for oil. The foolish, you see, had foolishly tried to keep something of themselves for themselves. They held something back. They did not carry their crosses up Calvary's hill and die completely to themselves that Christ in them might fully live. They did not go all the way.

It's the same story in the parable of the talents. All three slaves belong to the master but only two act wisely and share in their master's joy (Mt. 25:14-30).

Jesus prefaced both parables, the parable of the virgins and the parable of the slaves, with the phrase, "*The Kingdom of heaven is like*" because He is describing one kingdom, not two. (You won't hear this in my church, either.) Since Jesus told those parables, the truth of the kingdom hasn't changed, just the preaching.

Those in the kingdom of God who act imprudently now by trying to save something of themselves, later suffer regret. While those who act wisely in this world in this life, suffer to the end of themselves now but are exalted

later. That's how it goes. That's the law wisdom and suffering. One precept that's not found in the law of wisdom and suffering, is suffering simply for the sake of suffering.

Some believers consider suffering for the sake of suffering to be so Christ-like that they intentionally seek debasement.<sup>17</sup> This is nuts. But the Church has endured nutty preaching for some time. Some long-passed believers were sainted at least in part for self-mutilations. One nut of yesteryear was sainted partly for keeping her rotting flesh in a vase, another for eating a scab, another for eating pus.<sup>18</sup> Seeking out agonies apart from the will of God is sin (1 John 5:3). Self-debasement is false humility. False humility is foolishness and arrogance. Neither foolishness nor arrogance are part of the law of wisdom and suffering.

Christians who pretend to godliness via acts of false humilities, do not understand the law of wisdom and suffering. They mistakenly think

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<sup>17</sup> "Pain, an Enigma or a Mystery?"; Card. Javier Lozano Barragan;

[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/hlthw\\_ork/documents/rc\\_pc\\_hlthwork\\_doc\\_20050629\\_barragan-aachen\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/hlthw_ork/documents/rc_pc_hlthwork_doc_20050629_barragan-aachen_en.html); viewed October 23, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> <https://listverse.com/2016/09/22/10-incredibly-gross-stories-about-beloved-saints/>; viewed April 23, 2019.

sorrows themselves enhance their standing in the kingdom. Seeking sorrows is a form of self-saving. Self-saving is the height of arrogance.

They do not comprehend that it is wisdom that exalts a man, not suffering. Some Christians have been so confused on this point that they seek suffering to the point of self-martyrdom. Jesus did not kill himself. He did not self-martyr. As with the foolishness of avoiding unjust suffering, false humility also lies outside the will of God.

As mentioned afore, one of today's aberrations of the law of wisdom and suffering is denying that suffering is a part of the normal Christian life. This misbelief partly defines kingdom life or 'the abundant life' as an earthly existence apart from suffering. This too is nuts.

Believers stuck in this ditch running beside the narrow way will one week pray for the fire of God to fall and then the next week rebuke the devil for every ill and inconvenience suddenly appearing on the horizon of their lives. I have seen this very behavior condoned by church leadership. In my church, at the beginning of every Sunday service, it's preached.

If the abundant life truly means living apart from suffering, then Jesus' existence on earth fell short of God's glory. No, it was God's good plan that Jesus suffer unjustly. God ordained the same plan for every apostle and prophet in the Bible. Every sincere man of God I've ever known or read about has suffered unjustly and suffered much. Suffering works eternal glories in those who will be wise.

To the degree that a believer rejects suffering is the same degree to which he disdains God's Messiah, the Suffering Servant (Mat. 7:2). The believer who spurns some part of Christ's agonies—let's say he recoils at the crucifix— isn't yet willing to die completely to himself that Christ might live (Gal. 2:20). To avoid God-sent suffering even as an intellectual exercise, means rejecting the godly wisdom that comes with it. To hope in Jesus for salvation with one breath and with the next preach suffering as abnormal Christianity means being locked out of the wedding feast. It means being a foolish virgin. It means being in the Master's kingdom but not sharing in His joy. We are not going there.

Once I was sharing the Gospel with street children in a third-world nation and recounted



some of the agonies that Jesus endured on their behalf. While detailing some of our Lord's sufferings, a member of my evangelism team cried out, "*Oh John! Do you really have to tell all that?!*" In a sense this woman was recoiling at the crucifix. Her reflexive statement revealed that she had more of God to meet and a load of godly wisdom to gain. She had not begun dying to herself that Christ might live. She had not matured since salvation. She was protecting her flesh. She wanted to save herself for herself.

## Chapter 5

### A Short List of Suffering Servants Exalted by God

- A. In God's own Son, God reveals that submitting to the law of wisdom and suffering is advantageous. Jesus is the Pattern that believers are admonished to follow all the way. From the beginning of His life on earth, "*Being found in the appearance of a man,*" Jesus—the Lawgiver—subjected Himself to the Law (Phl. 2:8). Because Jesus has more wisdom than any man and is exalted higher than all, the law of wisdom and suffering required that He be buried in sorrows deeper and blacker than all (Mat. 13:54). So He was.

To be exalted above all, Jesus became the least of all. Jesus was "*despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; ... stricken, smitten of God and afflicted*" (Isa. 53:4-5). Because Jesus was "*stricken, smitten of God and afflicted,*" it was right and just for Him to be "*exalted to the right hand of God*" (Acts

2:33). Heman and Paul followed the Pattern that Jesus laid down from the beginning of time. Any man today can do the same. God is no respecter of men. You can do it. You can go all the way.

B. Job—family man, businessman and lover of God—for the sake of righteousness endured belittling by his wife, mocking by his friends and revilement from his servant. Job was grief-stricken over his children's untimely deaths, rendered destitute in a day, and made painfully ill through no fault of his own. Job suffered so terribly that he wished himself unborn. Yet this paragon of godliness, this giant of antiquity, clung to his respect for God like a drowning man to a lifeline. God was Job's true treasure. God was Job's true love. Job would have his heart pierced by a thousand darts but he would not quit trusting God to save him. Because of his dogged faithfulness, Job was exalted and *"the Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning"* (Job 42:12). You can be as great a man of

God as Job. He's pulling for you. I am too.

- C. In Psalm 31, David (c. 907-837 BC) says His vision, soul and body are wasted away from grief, that his life is spent with sorrow, that his friends have forsaken him, that he is as forgotten as a dead man. David says he is being hunted down by terrors on every side. Throughout his trials, David never wavered in his all-out love for God. Some 45 years pass after writing this psalm of anguish, and suddenly David writes that he is raised on high, that he is the anointed of God, that he is "*the sweet psalmist of Israel*" (2 Sam. 23:1). What a change. After becoming acquainted with grief and familiar with sorrows, David is so exalted by God that Jesus, the King of the universe, is rightly called the Son of David (Mat. 9:23). You are called to live like a son of David. With Christ in you, you can do it. You can go all the way.
- D. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon (c. 605-562 BC), went insane with arrogance and "*was driven away from*

*mankind and began eating grass like cattle, and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair had grown like eagles' feathers and his nails like birds' claws"* (Dan. 4:33). One of the greatest kings the world has ever known was thrown down from mankind's highest heights until he lived like an animal beneath the feet of all men.

In one hour Nebuchadnezzar's appearance changed from beautifully attractive to disgustingly repulsive. His status altered from most honored to most despised. His fate plummeted from heights most desirable to depths so low they were to be avoided at all costs. Then Nebuchadnezzar—the vagabond animal-man, acted with wisdom. He raised his eyes toward heaven and repented of his pride. Nebuchadnezzar *"blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever"* (Dan. 4:34).

Because of Nebuchadnezzar's contrition, his act of wisdom in the midst of profound suffering, Nebuchadnezzar announces, *"I was*

*reestablished in my sovereignty and surpassing greatness was added to me” (Dan. 4:36). In suffering, Nebuchadnezzar discovered wisdom and was exalted by God.*

- E. The Holy Spirit said of Paul—the man who penned two-thirds of the New Testament, *“I will show him how much he must suffer for My name’s sake” (Acts 9:16). Years after this pronouncement Paul confesses, “we are weak, ... we are without honor. To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now” (1 Cor. 4:10-13). Paul endured suffering and responded with wisdom, and then the King of kings awarded him a crown of righteousness (2 Tim. 4:6-8). Can you drink from the same cup? Can you drink it to the dregs?*

## Chapter 6

### The Foolishness of Expecting Happiness in Wisdom

The loony idea that *happiness* can be attained through wisdom has been malingering around church doors for some time. In 1885 the refrain to the hymn *Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed* was written. The hymn claims that an act of wisdom resulted in enduring happiness:<sup>19</sup>

*At the cross, at the cross where I first saw the light,*

*And the burden of my heart rolled away,*

*It was there by faith I received my sight,*

*And now I am happy all the day!*

To be fair the intent of the author was probably to express his eternal *joy* at finding salvation, not happiness. A profound difference exists between joy and happiness.

Whatever the author of this song intended, the point here is that those who seek happiness in wisdom are on a fool's errand, not a knight's quest. Like the Spanish explorer Ponce de Leon fruitlessly slogging his way through the

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<sup>19</sup> Isaac Watts (song); 1707; Ralph Hudson (refrain); 1885.

Florida swamps in search of the mystical Fountain of Youth, those who seek happiness in wisdom hunt for treasure never found. Happiness is not found in the pursuit of wisdom. Suffering is. While joy is found on the road of wisdom, sorrow, like speed bumps, cannot be missed along the road that leads up Calvary hill.

In the 1980's John Piper coined the term "Christian Hedonism." With this phrase Piper described his search for happiness in Christianity as if his quest were a fait accompli. He wrote, "*'Christian hedonism' [means] the desire to be happy is a proper motive for every good deed, and if you abandon the pursuit of your own joy, you cannot love man or please God.*"<sup>20</sup> When analyzed, Piper's assertion is illogical and his term, "Christian hedonism," oxymoronic. American Christendom can do better.

In defense of Piper's claim some Piper acolyte might proffer, "*Jesus endured the cross 'for the joy set before Him,' so shouldn't His disciples do likewise?*" (Heb. 12:2). In rejoinder, whose joy, I ask, did Jesus seek through His endurance? Was it Jesus' own joy He sought or was it joy

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/christian-hedonism>; viewed November 1, 2017.



belonging to others? If it was not for others' joy but for His own that Jesus endured the cross then the motivation for His final act of selflessness was selfishness. Selflessness and selfishness are not birds of a feather. They are antonyms as opposite as righteousness and wickedness.

Aggrandizing self through selflessness is an impossibility, and Piper's argument, fallacious. In contrast to Piper's wild assertion, Jesus is neither contradiction nor fallacy. Jesus is not at war with Himself. "*Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!*" (*Deu. 6:4*). Jesus abides in perfect unity, calling all to live likewise.

If Jesus gave Himself away for others, then He is selfless (and He is); but if Jesus was a wee bit selfish then He saved some snippet of Himself from death (but He didn't). Jesus, in absolute wisdom, lived totally selfless. He submitted His desires to the Father's will and died in hopes that we might fully live. Jesus went all the way.

We can say that whenever a disciple of the Selfless One acts selfishly, the disciple is inconsistent with his Teacher's teachings. The selfish Christian does not shoulder his cross

and follow Christ. Not all the way. Such a Christian plays a game, a game that makes a mockery of Christ. The mocking Christian lives like Piper—selfishly, no matter how erudite his earthly wisdom seems. No, Jesus didn't allow to be crucified that which He aimed to aggrandize. Neither do those who truly follow Him. Think about it.

What sane man would methodically hand over to destruction the very thing he desires to save or make grand? To do so would be illogical at best and mental illness at worst. Self-sacrifice and self-love are mutually exclusive forces. No man who loves his life can take up his cross and follow Jesus all the way through Friday afternoon. Somewhere along his metaphysical path up his Calvary hill, in the interminable anguish, the selfish man will stop following Jesus. At some point that man will have gone far enough. He will quit. He will not go all the way. To go all the way would require handing over to destruction that which he holds most dear, his very life, the thing he means to magnify. Thus Piper's notion that self-love is a sufficient motivation for self-sacrifice is inconsonant with Christianity. And how many of our pulpits has Piper preached in?

When Piper uses Hudson Taylor as an example of a supposedly non-self-sacrificial life that pleased God, he's taking Taylor's words—"*I never made a sacrifice,*" out of context. Taylor makes his claim in reference to his life *after* he laid his life upon the altar, not before. This is what Isaac did.

Taylor is saying that *after* a man dies to himself that Christ might live, he then has nothing more to sacrifice; he is dead to self (Gal. 2:20). Counting his life as nothing before it becomes nothing means his life is willfully expended before his final breath. He is doing what Isaac did, which is what Jesus did, which is what all are called to do.

He who has yielded all has nothing left to offer whether he breathes or not. When a follower of Christ reduces his own life to nothing as did Taylor before he physically died, then Christ's inexhaustible life in him begins in earnest. Taylor did not have to wait to arrive in heaven to live forever. Hudson Taylor began living forever the moment he died to himself here on earth. Such living is normal Christianity. We are called to it.

To approach this from another angle, let us begin by affirming that a man can only give what he has. And when a man has given all away, he has nothing left to hand over. When a man fully yields his self-will to Christ, then as Paul explained, the life he lives is not his own. He no longer rules his own life. His life is Christ's life, and it is Christ's life to do with as Christ pleases. Thus the total yielding of self-will enabled Hudson Taylor to write near the end of a life chock full of suffering, "*I never made a sacrifice.*"

Taylor never meant as Piper would have us believe that the pursuit of happiness motivated him to follow Christ all the way.<sup>21</sup> Selflessness is what St. Paul drives at when writing, "*I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me*" (Gal. 2:20). Paul asserts his death even while he lives because he has yielded his self-will to the will of Christ.

The more I think about it, the more Piper's oxymoronic Christian Hedonism gets under my skin. Piper's nutty plan to crucify his flesh

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<sup>21</sup> *Hudson Taylor's Spiritual Secret*; Dr. & Mrs. Howard Taylor; Moody Bible Institute; 1989

because he loves himself defies logic. How could Piper, a man who seems so well-saved, be so fooled by his flesh, by Satan? No man can love “*God with all his heart, with all his soul, with all his mind and with all his strength,*” and have love left over for himself (Mark 12:30). Or will a sane man in pursuit of personal pleasure slaughter that which he seeks to make happy? (Mar. 8:34). I think Piper’s plan pure madness. What think you?

Christian Hedonism is what makes the five foolish virgins foolish (Mat. 25:1-12). Those five girls withheld something of themselves for themselves. They did not spend themselves completely for Christ, loving Him with all.

Like Piper’s Christian Hedonism, the five foolish virgins gave some to God but not all. They held some portion back. If you remember the story, the wise virgins admonished the foolish ones to go and buy more oil because they had money to buy more. The foolish had not spent all they had to prepare for the coming Bridegroom. They held a little something back when all is the price. They preserved a part of themselves for themselves. They had not fully died to themselves so that Christ might fully live. They remained a wee bit selfish. The

Selfless One will not be wed to one who is selfish. Such a union would be unequal yoking. The selfish bride is unworthy of the Bridegroom. God will not defile Himself by becoming one with sin.

Only one inspiration can carry a wise virgin through his (or her) Calvary hill on Friday and into the wedding feast on Sunday. And that inspiration is love (1 Cor. 13:13). This is why, *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength,”* is the first and greatest commandment (Mark 12:30), and Piper’s, *“You shall desire to be happy,”* didn’t make the list.

I’m not saying that a man cannot be in the kingdom of God while simultaneously being a naval gazing hedonist. I believe Piper is in the kingdom. Christ Himself said the foolish virgins were in the kingdom. A foolish relationship with the Lord trumps no relationship at all. *“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved”* (Romans 10:13). The place of regret the five foolish virgins occupy in the kingdom of heaven trumps the best seat in hell (Mat. 25:1). And Piper may have changed since the 1980’s. He could have matured. I don’t know the man, only one of his

writings from decades ago. Among Christendom, Piper is not alone in his primal desire for happiness. I hear it from the pulpit every Sunday. And my poor church is not alone.

In 2010, *Christianity Today* published an article by one of its associate editors entitled *Happiness Now! “Proverbs ... assumes”* [the editor writes], “each person chooses to act wisely or foolishly, and thus happily or unhappily.”<sup>22</sup> Goodness! A flagship evangelical publication asserting that happiness and wisdom are Scripturally synonymous. What will they invent next?

When Jesus prayed the High Priestly Prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, an act which we can safely assume was wise, He said, “*My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death,*” and his brow sweated blood (Matt. 26:37-38). At the time Jesus prayed, He was hours from a cross He could have easily avoided. The root of this so-called ‘wisdom-equals-happiness’ error runs deep, even into America’s most venerable seminaries.

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<sup>22</sup> Katelyn Beaty; Christianity Today; 2010;  
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/december/20.65.html?start=2>

A professor at Princeton Theological Seminary claims that a means exists by which any believer can simultaneously attain both wisdom and happiness.<sup>23</sup> In her book, *God and the Art of Happiness*, this professor posits that if one will just submit to divine law then both wisdom and happiness will abound.<sup>24</sup> “By submitting to it (“Jesus’ wise guidance”) we experience the wisdom that strengthens, empowers, and liberates the soul for a happy life,” the lady claims. With a cavalier stroke our professorette promises a pot of fool’s gold and with the next, counsels us to submit our will to divine law. While her promise of happiness is as vaporous as wind-blown smoke, her advice to submit to God is sublime. How confused.

What our professorette doesn’t realize—having not yet been that way herself, is that when a man humbles himself to obey every jot and tittle of the Law written on his heart (the New Covenant) then he necessarily denies

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<sup>23</sup> Ellen T. Charry, Professor of Systematic Theology; Eerdman’s (2010). Princeton Theological Seminary is the second oldest seminary in the United States. It is associated with the Presbyterian Church (USA)

<sup>24</sup> In correspondence dated October 21, 2017, Dr. Charry qualified her claim that one can enjoy a happy life in this world in this life by submitting to divine law thusly: “*intentionally applying the principles of asherism to one’s life enables a morally satisfying and therefore rewarding life.*”



himself, takes up his cross and follows Jesus to the uttermost end of himself. He allows his 'wants' to be nailed to a cross. He buries his earthly desires in a pit six feet deep. Yielding his rights, he is strengthened by God to be weak unto death, and dying to himself, he is liberated of his life to find himself alive in Christ.

While the Princeton professor takes great pains and many pages of good quality paper to expound upon her coquettishly termed "Asherism," which in regular-folk speak means "Happy-ism," it's worth noting that neither Heman the king's seer nor King David nor the Apostle Paul had a clue about how to attain happiness in concert with wisdom, nor did Jesus, King of the universe. These guys are pretty smart, I'm guessing. Smarter I'll bet, than those unbelieving theology professors indoctrinating America's next generation of soon-to-be erudite preacher people, none of whom will likely ever be able to make plain to us pew sitters one whit of Solomonic wisdom. Ugh.

Solomon wrote, "*The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning while the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure*" (Ecc. 7:4). This means that provided

one man cannot dwell in two houses at once then none can simultaneously experience wisdom and pleasure. It's either a visit to the house of mourning and gain wisdom or open the door to the house of foolishness and find pleasure. It's one house or the other, not both at once. No whole-hearted Christ follower has ever found a permanent seat at the table of merriment, and it is impossible for any man who loves God with all of his heart, mind, soul and strength to do so (Ecc. 7:2-4).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> cf. Isaiah 50:6 and Luke 9:51

## Chapter 7

### Three Types of Suffering

The suffering that I am acquainted with might be divided into three categories: Justifiable Suffering, Unjust Suffering and Unattributable Suffering. Let me expound.

#### **Justifiable Suffering**

Justifiable suffering is synonymous with discipline. Discipline is the pain a Christian endures that is directly attributable to his own wrong actions or inactions. This type of suffering can be in body or soul or some mix thereof. Justifiable suffering is sent by God to conform a man's will to God's desires. Just suffering is an act of God's love, and all who are loved, suffer the pains of discipline. This is a promise of God (cf. Heb 12:6-8).

Justifiable suffering is warranted. In a sense it's self-inflicted even when not arriving in the form of self-discipline. When justifiable suffering befalls a man, it either builds wisdom in him or cements his foolishness. The end to

which it works is the choice of the one who endures it. Discipline never benefits the fool. When the fool searches for the cause of some pain he's brought upon himself, he points the finger of blame everywhere but the mirror. His refusal to face the truth makes him at heart, a liar. Never admitting a need of discipline requires pride. Hence the fool is also prideful. The determined, repeated refusal to learn from discipline is the sine qua non of a fool. "Hard headed" or "stiff-necked," some call it.

Like the "Three Strikes and You're Out" laws enacted across the USA in the 1990's, a man's foolishness only goes so far before the cosmic Umpire calls "Strike three!" and he's out. Like the fellow Nabal—whose name means fool—the end of the fool is sudden and calamitous (1 Sa. 25:37-38). No matter how smart the world gages a godless man to be, no matter the accolades his worldly wisdom garners, he is at heart a fool and will be judged by God as such.<sup>26</sup> In the end, he'll be measured and found wanting without recourse.

Conversely, the humble man is built up by justifiable suffering. Being honest with the man

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<sup>26</sup> Psalm 14:1: "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.'"

in the mirror, the humble man discovers that discipline is the rod of God that comforts (Ps. 23:4). Justifiable suffering helps conform the humble man's will to the will of God. Growing strong through discipline, more discipline makes the strong man stronger, like Samson at his end (Judges 16:28).

Like a double-edged sword, justifiable suffering cuts a man this way or that. Which way it slices depends on his character. God's discipline helps separate, as the Bible calls it, 'the wheat' within a man from 'the tares' of his fleshly nature, and then it aids in removing 'the chaff' (that which is impure) from 'the wheat' (that which is pure). Justifiable suffering condemns the world even as it refines the sons of God for glory.

## **Unjust Suffering**

Unjust suffering might not be the best moniker for the sorrows a man endures through no direct fault of his own. Maybe Peter phrased this grade of suffering better when he called unjust agonies "*the sufferings of Christ*" (1 Pe. 4:13). Whatever we call them, sufferings in this category seem unwarranted, yet they're part

and parcel to the normal Christian life (1 Pe. 4:12). In some ways, unjust suffering is intrinsic to the human condition. Who doesn't suffer at one point or another for the sins of someone else? Since all men are created in the image of God, and God through Jesus suffered unjustly, maybe unjust suffering is part of the human condition.

Like justifiable suffering, unjust suffering is also a two-edged sword. It can work wisdom in a man or it can rip him apart. How a man responds to unjust suffering determines the end to which the cutting works. Like Joseph unjustly sold into slavery, unjust suffering works wisdom in those who will be wise. God admonishes His sons to bear up under unjust suffering nobly *“so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing”* (Jas. 1:4).

Unjust suffering is heaven's invitation to share in the character of Christ, to be perfect. It is a call to love when hated, to forgive when offended, to bless when harmed. The opportunity to act with grace, compassion and humility always comes when we are assaulted by anger, disrespect and arrogance. Unjust suffering gives one the chance to walk in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus Christ and to

experience peace in the place where none exists. “*Father forgive them, they don't know what they're doing,*” Christ Jesus intercedes for us from His cross so that we might likewise plead for those who nail our souls up beside His (Lk. 23:34). Most folks do not see it this way.

The foolish man sees unjust suffering as an assault upon his rights. When suffering unjustly, the foolish man craves justice. When offended, he demands to be made whole. But it's always impossible for him to get what he wants, that is, to be made whole.

First, the one who offended him is broken, and a broken man lacks the ability to make another whole. No man can give what he does not have. Second, the man desiring justice cannot be restored to a state he never knew, for he himself has sown brokenness in the same fashion in which he has been hurt (Gal. 6:7).

The man desiring justice has “*sinned and fallen short of the glory*” (Ro. 3:23). Always the man demanding justice desires what cannot be had. If he does not soon change course, he will become bitter, bitter like Shakespeare's Shylock clamoring for his pound of flesh.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Shakespeare's “The Merchant of Venice” (1596).

Bitterness is spiritual heart disease, and heart disease is death.<sup>28</sup> Like Shylock, the man who demands justice finds that justice in turn requires that he first make full payment for the injustices he himself committed. And that payment is steep. That payment consumes his accounts and demands more. Judgment is merciless to the one who shows no mercy. Hence, the fool, demanding justice, dies trying to preserve that which he cannot keep. Wanting to save his life, he loses it (Mat. 16:25). As it is written, “*Mercy triumphs over judgment*” (Jas. 2:13).

*“Though justice be thy plea, consider this:  
That in the course of justice none of us  
Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,  
And that same prayer doth teach us all to  
render  
The deeds of mercy”  
(Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*; Act  
4; Scene 1).*

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<sup>28</sup> Heart disease is the leading cause of natural death in the US. If as 1 Corinthians 15:46 claims, the natural world foretells spiritual realities then maybe spiritual ‘heart disease’ is the leading cause of spiritual death in America ([www.cdc.gov/dhdspl/data\\_statistics/fact\\_sheets/fs\\_heart\\_disease.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/dhdspl/data_statistics/fact_sheets/fs_heart_disease.htm); viewed September 2017).



## Unattributable Suffering

There is a third type of suffering native to the lands east of Eden (Gen. 4:16). This kind of suffering appears to have no cause. We might call it unattributable suffering. Or maybe this type of suffering better falls into the previous category of unjust suffering, the sufferings of Christ. I am not sure.

My goal here is to differentiate between unjust suffering that has a definitive source like Joseph's jealous brothers, and sourceless pains like Alzheimer's disease, birth defects and 250,000 Indonesians killed by a tsunami—the type of grief and suffering where a reasonable observer is left asking, *“How can an omnibenevolent, omnipotent, omniscient God allow this?”*

Like the other types of suffering, unattributable suffering is a two-edged sword. Whether observed at arm's length or experienced firsthand, unattributable suffering works wisdom in a man or tears him apart. How one responds determines the end to which the cutting works. Each man must choose whether

unattributable suffering works wisdom or bitterness every time it comes around.

When faced with unattributable suffering, a man can choose to question God's goodness (or even God's existence) or he can hope against his powers of reason that the King of the universe knows better than the man He made. In other words, the sufferer's response option is faith or faithlessness.

With enough faithlessness, a man can become so self-centered and hard-hearted that even the unjust suffering of others doesn't stir a single pulse of sympathy. But with enough faith in God a man can like Joseph in the dungeon, calmly sail a sea of unattributable suffering, and ensconced in steadfast faithfulness, transcend his human nature to be exalted by God. This is the great promise of Christianity: God became like man so that man might become like God. Or to say it as Carl Jung did, "*Where wisdom reigns, there is no conflict between thinking and feeling.*" There is no war within. Only peace.

Every time I see a picture of the deceased scientist Stephen Hawking, he looks to my eyes like he is blaming God for his physical condition, shouting with all his manly might,

“IF YOU WERE A GOOD GOD THEN I WOULDN'T BE LIKE THIS!”<sup>29</sup> God bore him ill will, Hawking long concluded. So Hawking, imminent scientist and atheist, returned the unkindness and waged war against God. Fighting the ‘ungodly God,’ Hawking twisted his God-given gifts around until he became a purveyor of hemlock, suavely saying as an Internet ad recently advised, “*Life is meaningless and death approaches therefore drink the poison.*” Hawking would not accept the fact that he lived like all men, a life outside Gan Eden.<sup>30</sup> He refused to reconcile himself to the law of wisdom and suffering. So, Hawking perished as a fool.

The alternative response to Hawking’s when overwhelmed with unattributable suffering, is to trust God more, to increase in faith, to hope despite the pain that, “*God works all things together for our good.*”<sup>31</sup> I struggle with this.

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<sup>29</sup> Hawking suffers Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS).

<sup>30</sup> The Garden of Eden.

<sup>31</sup> Romans 8:28

## Chapter 8

### The Mystery of Wisdom and Sorrow

On one hand there was a time when I wouldn't wish my life on anyone. It has been hellish. On the other hand, every good thing I possess came by hanging onto the shirt tail of my Lord Jesus Christ no matter the grief that came. Every pain has had divine purpose for my future, even as the stripes Jesus once suffered now bring us healing. As an Amish friend of mine once quipped, *"The stuff dumped on you in the past is fertilizer for the future."*<sup>32</sup>

That said, I'd be remiss not to admit that there seems to be a certain caste of Christians who suffer repetitively yet never learn from their heartaches. Maybe they're the foolish virgins, future teeth grinders of the Kingdom. If that's the case, suffering must be accepted as a gift from God before wisdom can be found in it. Suffering must be greeted with confidence in God and then walked with hand-in-hand no matter the cost until God takes the pain away, if He takes it away. On my better days, I have

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<sup>32</sup> Steve Lapp; Light of Hope Ministries;  
<http://lightofhopeministries.com> (viewed March 15, 2018).

approached suffering by staying in the thick of it until God delivers me out of it, making no provision the flesh, waiting for God's salvation, hanging onto hope despite the odds.

How sorrow works wisdom is a mystery to me. Maybe sorrows and griefs require one to hang on without understanding until understanding arrives. That might be it. Whatever the law of wisdom and suffering is exactly, I do know that in order to possess godly wisdom a man must become familiar with grief and acquainted with sorrows. He must follow the pathway of Christ. On this one and only pathway to wisdom, suffering is unavoidable. It's par for the narrow way. It's part and parcel to the normal Christian life. If a man will be wise, he will suffer.

If Church leaders are to admonish and teach "*every man with all wisdom*" so that they can present "*every man complete in Christ,*" then those men must first possess some aspect of the wisdom of Christ. They cannot give away what they do not have. And there is no way to gain the wisdom of Christ except by sharing in His sufferings (Col. 1:28-29). As long as us pew sitters allow our pulpiteers to keep proposing some newfangled means of attaining happiness

in wisdom, the bride will not yet have made herself ready for her Bridegroom (Rev. 19:7). In other words, like the children of Israel, we will keep wandering in circles around the desert. We can do better. We need better leadership. Maybe you?

## Chapter 9

### Some History of the West's Pursuit of Happiness as seen in Abbreviated Philosophies

Smart folk have puzzled over man's desire for happiness and the elusiveness of that happiness ever since Satan tempted Eve with happiness in the Garden of Eden. Here's a spattering of what some of our more notable philosophers posited, tenets of which have slithered their way into postmodern thought and bitten more than a few believers on the heel.

#### **Aristotle (384-322 BC)**

Aristotle wrote that happiness is the perfection of *human* nature. Aristotle's pursuit of happiness through rational capacities and moral character—achieving happiness through manly traits such as courage, generosity, justice, friendship, citizenship, etc., is the foundation of secular humanism. It is the exaltation of man by man. It is the same lie the snake told Eve, that man can aggrandize and ultimately perfect

himself provided he acts forcefully, willfully and rationally. *“He is happy who lives in accordance with complete virtue and is sufficiently equipped with external goods, not for some chance period but throughout a complete life,”* goes Aristotle’s story.<sup>33</sup> And believing the story, the man who tries to save his own life, loses it (Mat. 16:25).

Importantly Aristotle denies that human nature is intrinsically flawed. He refuses to admit that human nature cannot be perfected through its own powers, no matter how powerful. Man has an error in his programming; it is called ‘sin nature.’ Sin nature is self-destructive. Invariably sin nature causes man to act for selfish reasons and in so doing, self-destruct. When Aristotle opined that happiness is the ultimate end and purpose of human existence, he revealed himself as one bent on self-destruction. Let us not go that way.

### **Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274 AD)**

*“Man’s ultimate happiness [Aquinas writes,] consists in the contemplation of truth.”*<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Nicomachean Ethics, 1101a10

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Aquinas; Summa Contra Gentiles, Book 3, Ch. 37;



If Aquinas meant that to think all day every day about Jesus—the embodiment of truth, then he was onto something; he was rephrasing the First Great Command (Matt. 22:37). But Aquinas wasn't onto that line of reasoning. We know this because Aquinas asserts that in this world in this life man can never attain “ultimate happiness,” a state of being that he terms *beatitudo*. Unable to attain ultimate happiness but still desiring happiness, Aquinas invents a lesser degree of happiness and then lowers his aim for that. He calls the lesser degree *felicitas*.<sup>35</sup> But Aquinas' argument for finding even a “lesser happiness” through wisdom is sophistry. His proof is fallacious.

Aquinas ‘proves’ his assertion that some degree of happiness is attainable by quoting Psalm 103:5; “[God,] *Who satisfies your years (your desire) with good things (happiness), so that your youth is renewed like the eagle.*” Aquinas says God satisfies man’s desire with “good things” (*towb*). But it’s important to understand that it is Aquinas who decides that the desire of the godly man’s heart *is* happiness, and it is Aquinas who judges that

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<sup>35</sup> The Pursuit of Happiness, Thomas Aquinas; Mark D. Setton; <http://www.pursuit-of-happiness.org/history-of-happiness/thomas-aquinas/>; viewed November 3, 2017.

“good things” are synonymous with just such happiness.<sup>36</sup> Neither supposition is true.

The “good things” promised to man by God in Psalm 103:5 is the nature of God, or we might say, it’s God Himself. God promised Abraham that He Himself would be Abraham’s reward, his eternal possession (Gen. 15:1). “*After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying, ‘Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your very great reward.’*” All the sons of the faith to include Aquinas, in one sense receive the same reward as did the father of the faith. In other words, “good things” is synonymous with “*Christ in you, the hope of glory*” (Col. 1:27). Contrary to Aquinas’ claim, happiness is not synonymous with good; “*Only God is truly good*” (Mar. 10:18 NLT). God Himself is the reward of those who act wisely, and only a fool chooses to pursue happiness instead of God. When a man attains God, then God in the man is good.

Consider this: Christ is our Pattern, and Satan offered Christ the world and He refused it. While people brought Christ Jesus gifts, He often appeared destitute of worldly possessions. I suppose Jesus ate what He

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<sup>36</sup> Thomas Aquinas; Summa Theologica Part 2, Q1, Article 8.

needed and gave the rest away. Jesus carried no money and seemed to wander about homeless (Mar. 12:15; Mat. 17:27; Mat. 8:20).

Obviously, Aquinas had not yet fully died to himself when he wrote his treatise on happiness. Two powers were yet at war within him: the flesh desiring happiness and the Spirit desiring God. That being the case, Aquinas fails to discern the different natures struggling within him. Mistaking both natures as godly, he tries to reconcile them within a divine context. But no matter how hard he tries, the two don't mix. Like attempting to make a solution from oil and water, it cannot be done. The flesh and the Spirit are at war.

Aquinas' conclusion—“*God alone constitutes man's happiness*”—misses the mark. It fallaciously implies that man needs happiness. The point I don't so strongly disagree with is Aquinas' assertion that God is man's happiness.

## Blaise Pascal (1623-1662 AD)

The polymath Blaise Pascal saw the error in Aristotle's premise.<sup>37</sup> *"All men seek happiness without exception [writes Pascal]. They all aim at this goal however different the means they use to attain it."*<sup>38</sup> Pascal goes on to say that man spends his life hoping to live instead of living, ever planning how to be happy instead of being so. Continuing to seek that which cannot be found is like searching for a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. He lives in fantasy land. The man who lives the life Pascal envisions, necessitates ultimate condemnation by the King of the universe for a wasting his life. I suspect that the man condemned by God to be neither wise nor happy. We will avoid this way as well.

## John Locke (1632-1704 AD)

The empiricist John Locke asserts that the pursuit of happiness is a natural or God-given right.<sup>39</sup> In this I agree with Locke. After our

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<sup>37</sup> Pascal's *Pensees* includes repugnant anti-Semitic thoughts.

<sup>38</sup> Pascal's *Pensées*; thought No. 425; (1669) "Pensées de M. Pascal sur la religion, et sur quelques autres sujets"

<sup>39</sup> *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*; John Locke; (1689); <http://www.pursuit-of-happiness.org/history-of->

initial agreement however, Locke and I part ways. What he and I think is best done with this God-given right differs. Locke believes like Aristotle that man can find a suitable end in himself. He thinks that man can be fulfilled either in his pursuit of happiness or in his attainment of happiness. I think neither.

Wise men eschew their natural rights, submitting their will to the King of kings. Fools, however, crave the liberty to do as they please and in so doing undo themselves. Righteousness and wickedness exist on earth because liberty (free-will) is indeed a natural right, and different men choose differently what they do with their God-given liberty. The foolish choose one way; the wise, another.

### **Marcellus Emants (1848-1923 AD)**

Marcellus Emants knew the score and didn't mince words. Cutting to the chase he said, "*Only a fool can be happy.*" Well said, Marcellus!

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[happiness/john-locke/](https://www.happiness/john-locke/); viewed November 10, 2017. Some scholars trace the phrase "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" in the American Declaration of Independence to Locke (*The Natural Rights Republic*; Michale Zuckert; Notre Dame University Press; 1996).

## Chapter 10

### Wisdom in the Western Church Today

So just how far up the pathway of wisdom has the Western Church traveled and how much further have we to go? I can't say exactly. Part of the equation is based on the fact that each follower of Christ is different, and more, one assembly of saints has different strengths and weaknesses from the next. That said, I have noticed some mile markers that might give us a general idea where a sizable portion of us might be. *99 Reasons You Should Go to Church this Weekend*, an article on the Hillsong blog, seems as good a road sign as any to mark how much wisdom the Western Church generally possessed, at least in 2017, given our focus on mega churches and worship. Hillsong, an influential mega church, is renowned for its worship.<sup>40</sup>

So let's check out a half dozen of Hillsong's 99 motivators to attend church and see what the

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<sup>40</sup> <https://hillsong.com/collected/blog/2014/09/99-reasons-you-should-go-to-church-this-weekend/#.WehOZUyZPyw>; viewed October 19, 2017. The obvious desire of the author's (and publisher's) heart is that as many men as possible walk with God in newness of life. That is noble.

reasons reveal about the present state of the western Church. Again, these are a few published reasons to attend church given by a leading western assembly.

*No. 6. You'll probably see some old friends.*

*No. 11. If you're single, you may meet someone.*

*No. 31. You've probably got nothing better to do.*

*No. 40. It's a break from work.*

*No. 54. It will help your interpersonal skills.*

And my personal 'favorite,'

*No. 56. It will help you be a happy person.*

Nothing here with the gravitas of Luther's 95 Theses but a good deal about personal happiness. To be fair, several reasons Hillsong describes in favor of church attendance that I did not recount are plainly associated with gaining wisdom, and obviously the heart behind Hillsong's lengthy list is evangelistic and pastoral. Good on them.

That said, we shouldn't continue fooling ourselves. Not every maid called by the King is chosen as the bride (Esther 2). Not all who start out on the pathway of wisdom become worthy of Wisdom. Few pay the price to gain her.

Wherever you are on the narrow way, press on.  
Go all the way. Get Wisdom. She is better than  
a good name. She is more valuable than gold.  
Prize her, and she will exalt you.

*“Acquire wisdom! Acquire understanding!  
Do not forget nor turn away from the words of  
my mouth.  
Do not forsake her, and she will guard you;  
Love her, and she will watch over you.*

*The beginning of wisdom is: Acquire wisdom;  
And with all your acquiring, get understanding.*

*Prize her, and she will exalt you;  
She will honor you if you embrace her.  
She will place on your head a garland of grace;  
She will present you with a crown of beauty”  
(Proverbs 4:5-9).*

*“How much better it is to get wisdom than gold!  
And to get understanding is to be chosen above  
silver” (Proverbs 16:16).*