



Why We Have To Suffer

There is something within me that just doesn't want to believe Jesus, that doesn't want to believe that the hard things Jesus said apply to me. "In this world you will have tribulation," He said (John 16:33). Why is it that every time I face something hard, something painful, something unfair, why is it that I think something is wrong? I can't just accept that this painful trial, this tribulation, is the result of sin and brokenness in the world and that Jesus not only said it would be this way, that life would be hard, but that Jesus also said "Be of good cheer for I have overcome the world." I never think, at least not at the beginning, that this too is a gift from God for my salvation. Rather I tend to think that things are so hard because I have done something wrong, that something is not right in my relationship with God. However, St. Isaac the Syrian says the opposite.

For St. Isaac, tribulation of all sorts and every difficult and painful circumstance of our life is a gift from God. Listen to what St. Isaac says at the beginning of homily sixty-one:

From the love that the saints show for God on account of the things they suffer for His Name's sake (when they endure straitness and do not forsake that which God loves), their hearts acquire the boldness to gaze toward Him without a veil and to beseech Him with confidence.

Our ability to pray, "to beseech Him with confidence," comes from a certain kind of suffering. It comes from the suffering, the 'straitness,' we experience when out of love for God we do not forsake what God loves even though it hurts, even though we think we will find relief from our pain if we forsake what God loves.

Fornication, in all of its forms (pornography, masturbation, adultery, 'fooling around' or even just flirting), is a very common way we forsake what God loves. When we experience the suffering of passion (which is a redundancy, for passion means to suffer), we think that the temporary relief we may find in sexual sin is the only way to escape our suffering. We even argue to ourselves that God wants us to sin, for God wouldn't want us to suffer. However, according to St. Isaac (which is also, by the way, the universal teaching of the Church), God's will *is* that you suffer and that in your suffering, in the straitness of your passion, it is God's will that you continue to love Him and not forsake what He loves: purity, virginity, chastity. Why? Because it is only in this way that we can acquire boldness in prayer and then, St. Isaac says, "to experience anew and prove His aid, and to understand how great a providence He has for them, for in their perils He is found to be their Redeemer."

And, by the way, you don't have to suffer intense sexual temptation to experience the same 'straitness.' The same temptation to forsake what God loves comes when we want to complain rather than to be thankful, or to accuse others, or to gossip (both hearing and speaking), or to give advice we were not asked to give. Tribulation can come in the desire to eat or drink too much (or too little!), or in the form of a smouldering or flaring anger that impels us toward angry thoughts, words and actions. In all of these ways and many others also we suffer and in our suffering are tempted to forsake Christ in order to find temporary relief from our pain, literally to deny Christ by not loving what He loves. But if we will endure, if we will suffer for Christ's sake, if we will die with Christ rather than deny Him, then we will be raised with Him.



However, we often fail miserably. And even when we don't completely fail, we don't completely succeed either. Why is this? It's because we are made of clay. St. Isaac says, "Yet to endure with patience is not within our power. For how should the clay vessel endure the vehemence of the waters, if the divine fire had not hardened it?" The very process of suffering and struggling to love what God loves in the midst of our pain, this is what strengthens us, this is how we learn that God's grace is sufficient (2 Cor. 12:9). This is how we become strong in God through weakness. This is the fire that hardens the weak clay of our mind to stand firm in Christ.

St. Isaac says,

Then they learn the weakness of their nature and the help of divine power, when God first withholds His power from them while they are amid temptations. Thus He makes them conscious of their nature's impotence, the arduousness of temptations, and the cunning of the enemy. Thus He gives them to understand against whom they must wrestle, what kind of nature they are clothed with, how they are protected by divine power, how far they have advanced on the way, to what height God's power has raised them up, and how powerless they are before the face of every passion when the divine power is withdrawn from them. Through all these things they acquire humility, cleave closely to God, look for His help with expectation, and persevere in prayer. Whence could they have received all these boons, if they had not had experience of the many evils which God allowed them to undergo?

Indeed, from whence does the strength of God and the knowledge of God come? I think I have always imagined a kind of magic wand that God waved over those He loved so that they would be full of His virtue. Even the Apostle Paul tells us that his own humility came from a messenger of Satan sent to beat him up (2 Cor. 12: 7). If St. Paul had to learn humility through suffering for Christ's sake, should we expect anything less? No, there is no magic wand. We grow in Christ as we love what He loves, especially in the midst of suffering.