

"The Sword Of Suffering"

One of the most vivid illustrations of an embittered heart is seen in Herman Melville's notorious character Captain Ahab in his epic masterpiece *Moby Dick*. During a fierce battle at sea, the mighty white whale, Moby Dick, destroys Ahab's ship and bites off one of his legs. Although he survived the battle, Ahab's torn body and wounded soul would bleed into one another. While he lay brooding in misery, the memory of what Moby Dick had done became a mental torture that left him resentful, angry, and murderous. Although given an artificial leg made of whale bone, there was no prosthesis for his soul. Now obsessed with hate, Ahab mounted a voyage of vengeance seeking to find and kill Moby Dick, no matter the cost. During the climactic confrontation, Ahab hurls his final harpoon while yelling his now-famous revenge line, "...to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee." The harpoon becomes lodged in Moby Dick's flesh and Ahab, caught around the neck by a loop in his own harpoon's rope and unable to free himself, is dragged into the depths of the sea with the injured whale to his death. The ship and crew would all perish, except Ishmael who alone survived to tell the tale.

Life can be tough. There are days when we escape with nothing more than surface scratches, but there are other days when the wounds from sickness, tragedy, rejection, betrayal, or sin go deep and require much time to heal. What makes this pain so difficult to overcome is the fact the wound is so deeply personal. At the dedication of Jesus as a child in Luke 2, a devout man of God named Simeon would utter a prophesy that Mary would find painfully accurate in her life, "...a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also..." Mary would endure many surface scratches upon her heart as Jesus was both ridiculed and rejected, but the soul-piercing moment would come when she watched her Son suffer a violent death on a cruel Roman cross. Mary could not control the coming events in life, but she could control how she was going to respond to them. While there are many lessons we will learn in the school of life, there are few who attain honors in the etiquette of suffering. Early twentieth century minister Erwin Tieman said, "Nothing influences the quality of our life more than how we respond to trouble." When the sword would pierce its deepest, Job refused to curse God, David refused to blame God, and Paul refused to quit on God. Consider Mary's response in dealing with the sword of suffering.

Mary **anticipated God's practice of goodness**. Again, Mary would receive from Simeon's prophecy the startling news, "...a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also..." However difficult it must have been for a mother to hear, in telling her so many years in advance, it was God's way of letting her know He was already touched by her pain and was committed to meeting her in her hour of wounding. Nineteenth century Scottish minister Horatius Bonar said, "In the day of prosperity we have many refuges to resort to; in the day of adversity, only one." It should thrill our heart to know we can count on the Lord to always be present when we suffer. Joseph could not prevent the ruthless separation from his family, but "...the Lord was with Joseph." The three Hebrew children could not escape a fiery furnace, but found a fourth man "...walking in the midst of the fire...like the Son of God." Paul could not avoid desertion of friends as he faced certain death, but noted "...the Lord stood with me..." The sweetest fellowship with the Lord often comes in moments when our cross is the heaviest to bear. Such knowledge and assurance caused Job to boldly proclaim while still deeply wounded by the sword in Job 13:15, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him..."

Mary **appropriated God's provision of grace**. When Mary's sword-piercing moment would arrive, John notes in John 19:25, "Now there stood by the cross of Jesus His mother..." I cannot imagine the pain Mary must have felt as she witnessed this tragic scene. What enabled her to avoid the panic that produces fighting and fleeing? Amidst His own suffering, Jesus was still graciously providing for Mary's strength and salvation! It is worth noting, however, that the grace Mary received neither righted the wrongs nor cured the pain. God's grace is the supernatural empowerment to face life's unpleasantness and uncertainties with the knowledge that though it all looks wrong it will be all right because God is still for me. Grace did not give Samson back the eyes he lost, but it did lead him to the pillars for one more victory. Grace did not remove the sword from David's home, but it did make him more mindful of his influence as a father. Grace did not remove Paul's thorn, but it did give him vision to see God's glory in the thorn. No matter how deep the bitter trough we must drink, God's grace runs deeper to sweeten and

soften the bottom. I think J.C. Ryle said it best, "This only we may be assured of, that if tomorrow brings a cross, He who sends it can and will send grace to bear it."

Mary **accepted God's purpose of glory.** Twice in Luke 2, we are told that Mary rehearsed in her heart all the things she had heard, and pondered them continually in her mind. The idea is "she put it all together." Not everything would make perfect sense to Mary, but over time it would all be a perfect fit. Mary could graciously endure the suffering at the cross because she trusted God for glory at the tomb. John Calvin said, "It is a genuine evidence of true godliness when, although plunged into the deepest afflictions, we yet cease not to submit ourselves to God." The Lord is ever mindful of His plan for transforming our tears into triumph. Martha and Mary wanted the miracle of healing for Lazarus, but the Lord had a greater miracle of a resurrection in mind. The lame man in Acts 3 had a plan for raising his support, but the Lord had a greater plan of raising his stature in mind. Many times in life, our desires are met by a divine "no" because the Lord wants to lead us to a more glorious "yes!"

In Acts 1:13-14, we find Mary in the upper room with the disciples awaiting the promise of the Spirit. Rather than becoming bitter and barren, Mary kept moving and maturing. The sword of suffering has a way of either driving us to the Lord or driving us away from the Lord. Anywhere but near the Lord is sure to create a whale of a problem in our lives. By the way, in the annals of great fish, whales remain undefeated against men!

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