

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 24

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from
publications worldwide for an international
readership for the purpose of discerning the
obedience of faith*

EDITOR: DAVID PARKER



Published by
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS



for
WORLD EVANGELICAL FELLOWSHIP
Theological Commission

Volume 24 • Number 1 • January 2000

which their executioners have reduced them. They remain human beings. And God does not cease to be born in the amazing manner of their bodies. This criminal whom they seek to silence raises his song of innocence even more loudly; the cause he or she defends takes flight before the scandalized eyes of the world, passes on a message of peace and love, and dares to wash both human beings and their violence in the blood which has been shed. So Bishop Vladimir died with words of forgiveness for those who assassinated him.

The life, the death, the suffering and the profound significance which all these have come together in the absolute form of an invincible witness.

The Church Around Them

But more than persecutor and persecuted are needed to make a martyr. Around them the martyrs also needed the world, for which they are always the sacrifice. Others will speak when the victims are no longer in a position to do so themselves.

If martyrs owe their title to what they were, it is firmly connected with those who spoke of them and finished the story. This story emerges from monuments, from recollections, from books in which the church has a living memorial, and even more, its glory and its substance. 'Martyrdom', says one text from Vatican II, 'is considered by the church to be an eminent grace and the supreme proof of charity.' And if there is no witness to take over from the silence, the church still remembers these obscure servants with just as much respect in its assemblies as those whom it calls 'all the saints'.

To the eyes of faith, violence begins instead of ends, perpetuates what it had thought to break. At the funeral of Cardinal Stepinac, the Archbishop of Milan, later pope under the name of Paul VI, celebrated this proud permanency. 'The passion of Christ continues ... It was necessary for the Christ to suffer. It is still necessary for the church to suffer. For its fidelity to Christ, for its authenticity. To renew its capacity to speak to the world and save it. Martyrdom is one of its charisms.' T.S. Eliot, in *Murder in the Cathedral*, expressed such hope like this: 'We rejoice and mourn in the death of martyrs. We mourn, for the sin of the world that has martyred them; we rejoice, that another soul is numbered among the Saints in Heaven, for the glory of God and for the salvation of men.' And let us remember those of old who approached death as a threshold, certain of entering the kingdom of 'unquenchable light'.

But does one have to be a Christian to perceive a dawn in the heart of such darkness? Let us listen to someone who, without sharing this hope, does not hesitate to write: 'I, who do not believe in redemption, ended by thinking that the enigma of atrocity is not more fascinating than that of the simplest act of heroism or love. But only sacrifice can look torture in the eyes; and the God of Christ would not be God without the crucifixion.'

This article is reprinted by permission of the publishers from chapters II, III (pages 18–29) of *The Book of Christian Martyrs* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1990). The author is a freelance writer. Other contributors to the volume, translated from French original by John Bowden, are Bruno Chenu, Claude Prud'homme and Jean-Claude Thomas.

Towards a Modern Protestant Theology of Martyrdom

Joseph Tson

Keywords: Suffering, martyrdom, divine image, kingdom of God, providence, glory, testing, character.

The Westminster Catechism asks the question: 'What is the purpose of man?' The answer given is this: 'To glorify God and enjoy Him forever.' I believe that while this answer is good, a much more important question needs to be asked: What is *God's* purpose with man? In other words, why did God create man? What is God's final purpose with him and how is that purpose achieved? These are the most important questions that we can ask today.

The Bible gives us a clear answer to the question of why God created mankind. God created man in his own image with the purpose of giving him dominion over all creation. This purpose of God has never been changed or thwarted or abandoned. The fall of man did create a problem, but that problem was solved in the cross of Christ. However, a strange thing has happened in Protestant theology: the redemption of man through the cross of Christ has been made so central that for many, it has become the primary purpose of human history. This is equal to saying that God created man in order to save him. This simple reformulation shows us by just how far our theology has missed the mark.

The central purpose of God in human history has always been to make for himself a people 'conformed to the image of his Son', so that Christ would be 'the first-born among many brethren' ([Rom. 8:29](#)), ultimately, 'bringing many sons to glory' ([Heb. 2:10](#)). God's final purpose with these 'sons' is to 'put [them] in charge of all his possessions' ([Matt. 24:47](#); [Lk. 12:44](#)). Throughout the course of earthly history, God has been at work shaping his children, forming their character, preparing them for ruling, and testing their faithfulness and reliability. He does this by giving them tasks and responsibilities, by confronting them with difficulties and challenges, and by testing their allegiance to himself and their obedience to his rules and commandments. Moreover, God will continue this work until the end of history. The Bible refers to the realization of God's final purpose with man in several ways: at times, it is called obtaining the inheritance; at other times, reigning with Christ or being glorified with Christ; and it is also referred to as having treasures in heaven, or simply, as having rewards in heaven.

One of the basic arguments of this book has been that we must see suffering and martyrdom as an integral part of this ultimate purpose of God with humankind. More exactly, suffering and martyrdom should be perceived as two of the best means by which God achieves his purposes with man. Both suffering and self-sacrifice in the service of Christ produce the character traits that will bring a child of God to the closest likeness of Christ. This should be *our* goal because a Christlike character is the essential qualification for reigning with Christ.

Another basic affirmation of this book has been that the character which a person develops here on earth will remain a part of that person after death and will become a main issue for investigation at the judgement seat of Christ. The goal toward which we must aim in our earthly life is to develop a character that will be found blameless on that future day. God has to be pleased with what he sees in the configuration or the structure of our character. The works of each one of us will be judged there, but those works will simply reveal the character we developed in our lifetime on earth. In the end, our works and our character will both determine the verdict of the Judge: the place and rank he will assign to us in the kingdom of heaven. In fact, God's decision will reflect whether or not each one of us has fulfilled the goal for which God created man from the beginning.

A third basic thesis of this book has been that man has not been called to earn his place and rank in heaven. It is God who has predestined him for a specific place and rank. God has redeemed that individual and has given him the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit, then, who produces Christlikeness ([2 Cor. 3:18](#)) and a godly character (the fruit of the Spirit) in him. God's enabling grace makes one capable to do the good works that God has prepared for him to do. Meanwhile, God, in his goodness and generosity, has determined to give all his possessions to his children. Due to all these divine investments, the possibility of merit is utterly excluded, leaving no reasons whatsoever for us to boast. At the same time, however, all the things that the Holy Spirit is said to be doing in a person are also that person's own responsibility and obligation. In this way, the activity of God and the responsibility of man go hand in hand throughout the entire training process.

Suffering and martyrdom have to be seen as part of God's plan; they are his instruments by which he achieves his purposes in history and by which he will accomplish his final purpose with man. As we look at them from God's standpoint, we are able to see that they act in two directions. In the first place, by means of the suffering and martyrdom of his children, God is working certain things in society and in history. In the second place, by means of the same suffering and self-sacrifice, God is working something in that child, in his inner structure or character. This is a very important differentiation, and we shall now look at suffering and martyrdom under these two headings: suffering and martyrdom as part of God's strategy in the world; and, suffering and martyrdom as God's methods for forming and shaping the character of his children.

SUFFERING AND MARTYRDOM: GOD'S STRATEGY IN THE WORLD

Jesus Christ, as King of kings and Lord of lords, calls people to himself and demands from them total allegiance to himself. Nothing of this world, not father or mother, husband or wife, son or daughter, or material goods, ought to stand between him and his children. Jesus expects them to learn from him and to become like him. Then Jesus sends them into the world as his Father sent him into the world, to spread his message and to be his witnesses. He knows that the world will hate his witnesses and will turn against them with merciless violence. Nonetheless, he expects them to meet that hatred with love, and to face that violence with glad acceptance, following his example by suffering and dying for the lost world. Their suffering and martyrdom are prompted by their allegiance to his own Person and are endured for the purpose of spreading his gospel. Christ's disciples do not seek these things for their own sake, and they do not inflict these on themselves. Their goal is not to suffer and to die; on the contrary, their goal is Christ's Person and Christ's cause in the world, the spreading of his gospel.

Suffering for Christ is not only the suffering of persecution. It begins when one leaves close relatives for the service of Christ. For some, it means selling their possessions and giving them to the poor, which often means giving them for the propagation of the gospel. For others, suffering for Christ may mean agonizing in prayer for the cause of Christ, or agonizing and toiling for the building up of the body of Christ and the perfecting of the saints. Again, to clarify this concept, suffering for Christ is not a self-inflicted suffering. The disciple of Christ seeks to do the will of Christ and to promote the cause of Christ. However, suffering for Christ does mean that the disciple will *voluntarily* involve himself in suffering and in sacrificial living for Christ and his gospel.

Furthermore, a disciple of Christ thinks as a slave of Christ: he is totally at the disposition of the Master. It is the Master who decides what kind of service this particular disciple should perform. The first duty of the disciple is, therefore, to discover the will of his Master and to do it with joy and passion. If and only if the disciple does his duty, can

he be certain that his Master is always with him, living in and through him to accomplish his own purposes.

Martyrdom is the function God gives to some of his elect to literally die for the sake of Christ and his gospel. From what the Scriptures intimate, it is apparent that there is a fixed number of God's children who have been predestined by God for this supreme sacrifice. For some, martyrdom might be a quick event, like being shot or beheaded, but for others it could also be preceded by torture. God may have in his plan a long martyrdom of toiling in a labour camp or the misery and pain of a long imprisonment. In such a situation, even if the Christian is released after some time and the actual death occurs at home because of his health having been shattered by the long detention and suffering, I believe that God still reckons his death as a martyrdom. In our more sophisticated age, martyrdom might also take the shape of an imprisonment in a psychiatric hospital—a modern form of torture that is possibly the most cruel form of martyrdom—where one's mental health and even one's personality are utterly ruined by means of drugs and other psychological torture.

God does everything with a purpose. If he chooses to call his children to suffering and self-sacrifice, he must have very important purposes to achieve through them. Hence, it is the duty of the children to obey their Father even if they do not understand the purpose or rationale behind the Father's command. But the Father wants his children to understand him, because he wants them to develop a mind like his. Therefore, he has revealed his mind, his purposes, and his methods to his children in his written Word and in his Incarnate Word.

God entered into history by sending his incarnate Son as a suffering slave who would end his own earthly life enduring torture and martyrdom. In this event, God revealed to us that suffering and self-sacrifice are his specific methods for tackling the problems of rebellion, of evil, and of the sin of mankind. Self-sacrifice is the only method consistent with his own nature. For instance, God cannot respond to hate with hate, because if he did, he would borrow not only the method but also the nature of the one who is the originator of hate, the evil one. God can respond only with love, because he *is* love, and by suffering and sacrificing himself for the ones who hate him, he expresses the essence of his own nature.

Now, the ones who are born of God have become partakers of the nature of God ([2 Pet. 1:4](#)). Therefore, the children of God are called to tackle the problems of this world with the same *agape*-love which is the nature of God ([1 John 4:4-21](#)). More than this, Christ united himself with his brethren in a union that is comparable to his union with the Father ([John 17:21-26](#)). Christ lives in them and continues his work in the world through them. But he has not changed the strategy he used when he was in the world. His method is still the method of the cross. With this in mind, Christ told his disciples that he would send them into the world just as his Father had sent him into the world; in other words, he sent them to be in the same position and to conquer by the same method, namely, the method of the cross. For precisely this reason, Jesus asked them to take up their own crosses and to follow his example by going into all the world to preach the gospel (to witness), to serve others, and to die for others. Their crosses represent their voluntary sacrificial involvement in the fulfillment of their Father's purposes with mankind.

There are three basic results of the deaths of the martyrs.

MARTYRDOM AND THE TRIUMPH OF GOD'S TRUTH

The unredeemed world lives in spiritual darkness. The eyes of unbelievers have been darkened by Satan, resulting in their hatred of the light of truth. For people who have lived

a long time in darkness, a bright light that suddenly shines upon them produces pain. They cannot stand the light. They hate the light, and they do their best to put it out. Jesus explained the world's reaction to his own coming into the world in these terms ([John 3:19–20](#)), and he told his disciples to expect exactly the same kind of treatment.

Speaking in modern terms, each group of people on this planet considers its own religion to be one of its most precious treasures. Thus, telling them that their faith is wrong or untrue becomes an unforgivable offence and insult against them. The attempt to change their religion is perceived as an attack on their 'national identity'. This is why Christian missionaries are met with hostility and violence in every place to which they carry the gospel. For his part, the missionary must be convinced that the population to which he takes the Word lives in the lie of Satan and is damned to hell as a result of it. If the missionary is not convinced of this, he will not risk his life to kindle the light in their midst.

However, when the ambassador of Christ speaks the truth in love, and meets death with joy, a strange miracle occurs: the eyes of unbelievers are opened, they are enabled to see the truth of God, and this leads them to believe in the gospel. Ever since the centurion's eyes were opened at Calvary, ever since he believed that Jesus was the Son of God *because he had seen the manner of His death* ([Mk. 15:39](#)), thousands and thousands of Christian martyrdoms over the centuries have produced the same results. Moreover, this was precisely what Tertullian had in mind when he wrote that the blood of the martyrs is the seed out of which new Christians are born. Many, many groups of people on this planet have testified that the darkness which had been over them was dissipated only when a missionary was killed there. However, countless areas and peoples of the world today still experience a darkness that will be vanquished only when enough Christians have given up their lives in martyrdom among them.

MARTYRDOM AND THE DEFEAT OF SATAN

Jesus saw his own coming into this world as an invasion of the strong man's house in order to spoil his goods ([Matt. 12:29](#)). He saw the Prince of this world being cast out at his own death ([Jn. 12:31–33](#)), and as a result of the ministry of his own disciples ([Lk. 10:17–19](#)). Jesus taught them not to be afraid of the ones who can kill only the body, and he charged them to bravely lose their lives in order to gain the victory ([Matt. 10:26–39](#)). Hence, John was simply following the teaching of his Lord when he depicted the casting out of Satan and his defeat through the deaths of the martyrs in [Revelation 12:9–11](#).

Satan has two instruments with which he keeps humans in bondage and slavery. His first instrument is sin. The sins of people are Satan's 'certificate of ownership'. But this document was nailed to the cross of Calvary and was cancelled by the death of Christ ([Col. 2:14–15](#)). Satan's second instrument is the fear of dying ([Heb. 2:14–15](#)). Again, by his own death, Jesus liberated his own from the fear of death. When the martyrs meet their death without fear, Satan's last instrument is rendered powerless, and he is crushed and defeated.

As the deceiver of the nations, Satan maintains their enslavement by keeping them in the darkness of his deception. When the martyrs cause the truth of God to shine brightly among the nations, those who were formerly in the bondage of darkness respond by turning back to God. The death of the martyrs opens the eyes of unbelievers, and when they see the light, Satan's power over them is gone. We have further proof of this reality in the Book of Revelation, where we see the knowledge of God coming to all the nations as a result of the deaths of the martyrs ([Rev. 11:1–19](#); [14:1–12](#); [15:2–4](#)). The martyrs are shown to defeat Satan by bringing all the nations to God through their witness and death.

The story of Job shows us another aspect of Satan's defeat by the faithfulness in suffering of God's people. Job's refusal to curse God demonstrated to the whole population of heaven that God had genuine worshippers on the earth, thus proving Satan wrong. The suffering of Job was watched by the hosts of heaven as an extraordinary spectacle. It appears that Paul had the experience of Job in mind when, speaking of the suffering of the apostles, he said that they 'have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men' ([1 Cor. 4:9](#)).

Writing from prison about his own ministry, Paul told the Ephesians that 'the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places' now have the opportunity of knowing God's 'manifold wisdom' as it is being manifested in the church ([Eph. 3:10](#)). Paul was talking about the same wisdom of God that he had earlier described in [1 Cor. 1:17-31](#). This is the wisdom of God which the world considers utter foolishness: that he sent his only Son to die on the cross. However, the manifestation of God's wisdom in this world did not end with Jesus on the cross; it is continued in his children when they obey God's commission to go into the world and to sacrifice themselves for the cause of Christ. As they conquer by dying, God's children demonstrate his wisdom to the whole cosmos. Moreover, by their witness and death, Satan is discredited and defeated.

MARTYRDOM AND THE GLORY OF GOD

Jesus described the outcome of his crucifixion as both his own glorification and as the glorification of God ([Jn. 12:27-32](#); [13:31-32](#)). Yet death by crucifixion was one of the most shameful and barbaric modes of execution; how could *that* be considered an act glorifying to God? The answer becomes clear when one sees what that act has revealed to the world. In Christ's voluntary suffering for the salvation of mankind, the true nature of God was revealed. His essence was shown to be perfect love, utterly and unconditionally giving itself to others, even enduring pain and death for them. The glory of God shines through the beauty and splendour of self-sacrifice as nowhere else, and most importantly, this glory of God, the glory of his self-sacrificing love, shines out in each martyrdom. For this reason, John referred to the martyrdom of Peter as 'the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God' ([Jn. 21:19](#), NIV). It was also the reason why Paul was so determined to glorify Christ by his own dying ([Philp. 1:20](#), NASB).

Martyrdom has the power of revealing the love of God to those in darkness. Herein lies its power to convince and to persuade: people see the love of God in the death of the martyr and are compelled to believe in God's love and sacrifice for them. Paul expressed the same idea in the concept of reflecting the image of Christ or the glory of God to other people through our suffering and our loving self-sacrifice for others ([2 Cor. 3:18](#); [4:1-15](#)). As the knowledge of Christ and the grace of God is spread to more and more people through the sacrifice of the children of God, there is more and more thanksgiving, praise, and glory given to God.

SUFFERING AND MARTYRDOM: FORMING THE CHARACTER OF THE ONE WHO ACCEPTS THEM

God achieves great things in the world through the one who accepts his way of suffering and self-sacrifice. In the end, however, it turns out that the greatest things are achieved in those who suffer with the sufferer himself. The one who sacrificially accepts to be a blessing for others discover that, in the final analysis, he is the one who has harvested the greatest blessings.

In all the literature that we have studied, from the Book of Isaiah to the Book of Revelation, from the Books of the Maccabees to *The Martyrs' Mirror*, we have seen the following truth clearly expressed and taught: the ones who suffer and die for their faith will have special rewards and will enjoy special privileges in heaven. As we investigated this issue, we saw that there were two main questions to answer. The first one was this: What is the nature or the content of these rewards? Or, worded in a slightly different way, what are the things that are promised to us as our future rewards in heaven? The second question we then asked was the following: Upon what criteria will the distribution of these rewards be based? The latter is an especially acute question if one seriously believes that God in his sovereignty has destined everything for his children, and that he bestows everything on his children by grace.

I have already indicated, at the beginning of these concluding remarks, that the answers to these questions are found when one understands the final purpose of God with man. We have seen that God created man so that he would ultimately be a partner with his only begotten Son in the ruling of the affairs of the created universe. Now, we have to focus in on a few aspects of this final purpose of God with mankind.

To begin with, God created the man and the woman in his own image. The creation of humanity 'in his image' is interpreted here to include both a structural and a relational sense. In the structural sense, the human person was created as a responsible being, with the capacity to reason, to feel emotion, and to will freely. In the relational sense, God made man with the capacity to enter into relationships; from the beginning, God put the first man in relationship with himself, with his wife, with the created universe, and later on with other human beings. I used the word *capacity* in both areas because in both, man must learn and grow. While the image of God in man was damaged by the fall of man, it was not destroyed. The basic damage was resolved by Christ's redemption and by the new birth; yet the need to grow into that image or to develop it to full maturity is still there (cf. [2 Cor. 3:18](#); [Eph. 4:22-24](#); [Col. 3:9-10](#)).

A very important aspect of 'the image of God' in us is character. A person's character is made up of all the things that a person does 'by habit', or that 'are his custom to do'. They are the things that have been practised so much that they have become part of the inner structure or makeup of that person. These 'habits' come to be recognized as the 'way of being' of a certain person. Jesus expressed this concept with his analogy of the 'good tree' and the 'bad tree'. Each tree produces its kind of fruit naturally. Jesus made it very clear that we shall be judged according to what 'our tree' produces ([Matt. 7:16-20](#); [12:33-37](#); [Lk. 6:43-45](#)). However, it is very important for us to see that Jesus commanded us not only to *bring forth* good fruit, but he commanded us to '*make the tree good*' ([Matt. 12:33](#), italics mine). Jesus also referred to this inner structure as 'the heart' of a person ([Matt. 15:19-20](#); [Mk. 7:20-23](#); [Lk. 6:45](#)). And again, Jesus made people directly responsible for the inner content of their lives, since it is out of 'the heart' that the outer behaviour flows ([Lk. 11:39-41](#)). Of course, this emphasis on *our* duty to change our own character does not mean that we can do it in our own power, but it does mean that we are responsible for using or not using the resources God has placed at our disposal.

There are three fundamental character traits that God aims to produce in us, and they are the most basic for our growth in Christlikeness. The first and most important is the willingness and the capacity to live under the authority of God. The attitude of submission and obedience to God, manifested by the fervent desire and diligent struggle to do things according to his commandments, is the basic trait that makes one fit to live harmoniously in the kingdom of God. God desires to have children who are free and capable of determining and choosing 'the good' themselves, and who, in that freedom, always choose to do what the Sovereign Father and Lord wants them to do. They would never presume

that there might be a better way than God's way of doing things. Since they are convinced that God's ways are always perfect and because they have the inner pleasure of doing the will of the Father, they will always fully obey him and will gladly submit to his commands.

The second most important character trait of a perfected child of God is *agape*-love. This love is the essence of the relationships in the Holy Trinity, in which each Person gives everything to the others and does everything for the others, to the honour and glory of the others. This is the love that produces a servant attitude even to the point of self-sacrifice. It makes service to others and self-sacrifice for others not a grudging obligation but a happy privilege.

The third character trait of a perfected child of God is wisdom. This is the capacity to apply the commandments of the Father and the ways of the Father in the most diverse and complex situations. It leads to combinations like 'speaking the truth in love' ([Eph. 4:15](#)) and other such Godlike attitudes and actions. Furthermore, a child of God displays wisdom when, possessing the freedom to choose between right and wrong, he always enjoys being totally obedient to the Father.

God did not desire robots that would automatically execute the tasks for which they had been previously programmed. He wanted free persons, capable of fellowship and partnership with him. But in order for this to happen, free persons need to have their character developed to this end in conditions and situations conducive to such growth. God, in his wisdom, decided that our present life on earth, with all its difficulties and challenges, is the kind of environment necessary for this purpose.

Suffering is a key aspect of the environment designed by God for the formation of his children's character. Christ himself was made 'perfect through suffering' ([Heb. 2:10](#), NIV). We are told that this meant, at least in part, that 'He learned obedience from the things which he suffered' ([Heb. 5:8](#), NASB), and that 'because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted' ([2:18](#), NIV). The Book of Hebrews, in the twelfth chapter, applies this principle to all the children of God. As his 'sons', we are commanded to 'endure hardship as discipline' ([12:7](#)), since 'God disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness' ([12:10](#)). 'Those who have been trained by it', discover on that final day that their suffering has produced in them 'a harvest of righteousness and peace' ([12:11](#)). Both the apostles Paul and James develop the idea that trials, afflictions, and temptations 'produce' in our character the qualities that will make us fit for our final destiny ([Rom. 5:1-5](#); [James 1:2-12](#)).

The suffering of Christ's messengers, when they are violently and brutally treated by the very people they are trying to reach with the truth, is an integral part of this process of Christlike character formation. As God's chosen ones suffer the arrests, tortures, and martyrdoms, special qualities are inscribed deep within their character, bringing them in the closest possible way to Christlikeness. This biblical teaching was well applied by Christians in the second and third centuries in their practice of calling the day when a Christian was martyred, the day of 'his perfection'. In addition, they recognized that Christians were not to pursue or to seek after these sufferings, inflicting them on themselves; they must pursue only Christ and Christ's ministry in the world. It is the Lord who chooses if and what kind of sufferings and tribulations will come to them.

Alongside God's purpose of *training* his children through suffering and martyrdom stands his equally important purpose of *testing* them. Again, this is a concept that is constantly taught in the Bible, both in the Old and the New Testaments. To summarize what was previously shown in the above study in greater detail, let us review the main points of Jesus' teaching on this subject, bringing in the concepts of δόκιμος and ἀδόκιμος used by Paul, James, and Peter.

On four different occasions, Jesus used the analogy of a king who entrusted his affairs to his slaves, and then went away, leaving them on their own for a long time. When the king came back, he gave rewards to his slaves according to the faithfulness they had demonstrated in the administration of what he had entrusted to them ([Matt. 24:45-51; 25:14-30; Lk. 12:35-48; 19:11-27](#)). When he had finished telling them this parable, Jesus gave them his conclusions, as well as his practical applications for this analogy, in the form of another parable: the story of the shrewd steward ([Lk. 16:1-13](#))

1. If one is faithful in the administration of little things, one will be faithful in the administration of big things ([Lk. 16:10](#)). Accordingly, the awarding of smaller or greater positions of responsibility in the kingdom of heaven will correspond to the degree of faithfulness demonstrated by the 'slave' in the management of the things entrusted to him in this world ([Lk. 19:11-27](#)).
2. The riches of this world are not 'true' riches: they are merely temporary things. Nonetheless, if one is not faithful in their administration, one will not be given the 'true', eternal riches in heaven ([Lk. 16:11](#)).
3. The things we have in this world are not ours. We are 'slaves', and slaves do not have ownership of anything. On the other hand, we are also God's children, and God has destined us for the possession of everything he has: the whole created universe has been designated as our inheritance. There is a catch, however. Although it is God's bountiful generosity to give us everything he has, he will not entrust us with what is our own, if we are not faithful in managing the things of this world, of which we are not owners but simply stewards ([Lk. 16:12](#)). At the same time, we are not called to 'earn' the inheritance by the things we do in the service of God in this life; rather, we are called to do these 'works' in order to prove ourselves reliable and trustworthy.

Therefore, the tasks we are given to do on earth, the trials and sufferings we endure, and the sacrifices we make, are both *training* us, that is, they are producing in us the character or the capability for responsibilities in heaven, and they are *testing* us, that is, they are giving us the possibility to demonstrate our faithfulness to the One who is so generous that he wants to give us all that he has.

At the end of the production line in every factory is the 'quality control', the person who has the job of checking each product, making sure that it meets the standards of the maker and that it is fit to be launched on the market. The judgment seat of Christ is where we will face our own 'quality control'. The verdict, in the words of Jesus, will be either 'Well done, good and faithful slave, ... you are worthy', or 'You wicked, lazy slave'. In the words of the apostle Paul, the verdict will be either δόκιμος, that is, 'tested and approved' as fit for ruling with Christ, or ἀδόκιμος, that is, 'tested and rejected' as unfit for positions of responsibility.

Paul depicted the lamentable situation of a person who has been saved, that is, has been accepted in heaven, but who has no reward there. Although he is in heaven, he cannot be entrusted with any responsibility, because he is not capable of handling the authority to rule. The analogy of the vessels of different sizes is very useful at this point. All the 'vessels' in heaven will be filled to the brim. Each one will be filled to its full capacity. For this reason, not one of them can complain that it has not been given enough or that it should have been given more. Most significantly, we have learned from the above investigation that the capacity of each vessel is developed here on earth in the faithful service that each renders to the King.

Additionally, the Bible makes it clear that although a child of God may be submitted to the harshness of life in order to be tested for reliability, it is God himself who will provide

that child with all the necessary resources for success. As a result, his final victory does not provide him with any reasons for boasting; knowing this to be true, God's child will say with all his being: 'All that we have accomplished you have done for us' ([Isa. 26:12](#), NIV). The concept of personal merit cannot have any place in the thinking of a child of God who has learned that God gives to each one of his children both the willing and the achieving ([Philp. 2:13](#)).

It is very important for Christians living in affluent countries to understand the test of earthly riches. God wants us to keep for ourselves and for our family that which we truly need and to invest everything else in the promotion of his kingdom. The great temptation is to keep it all for ourselves, and the more we accumulate, the greater our desire to acquire even more. Our heart becomes tied to our riches, and they become our 'treasure'. Sadly, we do not realize that this is the essence of the test to which we are being submitted: God wants to see whether we obey him or we follow our own appetites for more riches, hoarding them all to ourselves. Meanwhile, we are tragically unaware that, in this manner, our riches on earth become our poverty in heaven.

The following question may be asked: How much should we keep and how much should we give? This very question is part of the test. God has given us sufficient wisdom to know how much we need, and he gives us sufficient guidance to know what he expects from us in each situation. There will be no room for excuses at the judgment seat of Christ. There will only be the verdict, 'good slave' or 'bad slave'; we will only hear, 'tested and approved' or 'tested and rejected'. It is in this light that we have to understand what Jesus taught us about 'the deceitfulness of wealth' ([Matt. 13:22](#), NIV), symbolized by the thorns that choke the Word so that it never comes to fruition in an individual's life.

As vital as the test of earthly riches is for our eternal destiny, the supreme test is nonetheless in the form of suffering and martyrdom for Christ and his gospel. In these situations of extreme pain and agony, the endurance, perseverance, and faithfulness of the child of God is tested to the maximum. It was in Gethsemane and on Calvary that God tested his Son in the ultimate way, and it was because of his obedience in those situations that God gave him the highest position of honour and glory ([Philp. 2:5-11](#); [Heb. 2:9](#)). This is why God has reserved the greatest honour and glory for those of his children who go through sufferings, tortures, and martyrdom.

As we can see from the main body of this study and from the conclusions stated above, suffering and martyrdom have an extremely important role in God's strategy in human history. They express the essence of God's nature—his self-sacrificial love—and they point to the method of God's own involvement in the world. Furthermore, suffering and martyrdom play an essential part in God's way of transforming us into his own image.

For untold numbers of Christians passing through terrible sufferings and persecutions in many countries around the world today, the understanding of this biblical teaching may come as a life-changing revelation, revolutionizing their lives. As a consequence, their sufferings will suddenly 'make sense'. They will not see the trials and afflictions that have come over them as unfortunate calamities, but as the greatest gift and privilege they could ever have received from their Lord. Furthermore, this teaching may revolutionize not only the lives of persecuted Christians but also the lives of Christians living in freedom and affluence. In fact, these rich Christians may be in a greater danger than their brethren suffering trials and tribulations, because the testing of the former may be even more severe; having been given riches and freedom, they must now choose whether they will be Christlike and self-sacrificing or selfish and indulgent.

Jesus Christ is not a Santa Claus with the task of distributing goodies and pampering our feelings. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords who calls all of us to submit to him and to do our part in carrying out his own programme in this world. Of course, his

programme entails sacrificial living on our part, and when he comes again on that Last Day, he will judge us and assess us according to our obedience to his royal commands. He wants to make us kings just as he is King, but he will entrust such positions only to those who have obeyed him as he himself obeyed his Father.

It is possible that if confronted with it, most Christians today will reject this teaching, because it is too demanding. It is much more comfortable to live with a theology that offers only blessings and no demands. But wise people do not ask which theology is the most convenient; instead, they ask which teaching is true or, even better, which one comes from God.

My endeavour has been to capture the mind of God as it has been revealed to us in his inerrant Word and as it was understood by people who were challenged by the harsh realities of persecution, suffering, and martyrdom throughout history. This study has changed my own approach to life, and I pray that it will do the same for many others. However hard this teaching may seem, through it we come to understand that from the start of this difficult and exacting pilgrimage, all the way to its triumphant finish in our heavenly home, it is God who works his own extraordinary purposes in us, and it is he who will always merit all the praise and all the glory.

Dr Joseph Tson is president of the Romanian Missionary Society, PO Box 527 Wheaton Ill, 60198-0527 USA (www.RMS-world.org). He was pastor of the Second Baptist Church, Oradea, Romania until 1981 when he was exiled by the Romanian government. This article is the concluding section of his book, *Suffering, Martyrdom and Rewards in Heaven*, (Lanham: University Press of America, 1997 © Romanian Missionary Society, by permission). Dr Tson has also published *Marxism: the Faded Dream*, and *Religious Persecution in Romania*.

Christian Faith and Human Rights

Thorwald Lorenzen

Keywords: law, United Nations, rights, providence, divine image, humanity, dignity, liberation

1. THE RESPONSIBILITY OF KNOWLEDGE

Are we—as citizens and as Christians—responsible for what we know? Should it make a difference to our lives, to our faith, to our understanding of God, when government agencies use all the intricacies of modern technology to devise ever more effective instruments of torture in order to maim and break the bodies and spirits of men, women and children?

- when 15 million children under the age of five die each year—that is 40,000 each day—because they don't have enough food, water and medical care; and when millions of those who survive are exploited by child labour and child prostitution?