



## **Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States**

### **Monthly Message for the Consecrated – March 2024**

#### **Blessings of Pain in the Life of Devoted Servants**

##### **Introduction:**

In the journey of faith and service, pain and suffering are often considered unwelcomed guests. However, from the perspective of the Church and the fathers, these trials are not merely obstacles to be overcome, but opportunities for growth, purification, and spiritual advancement.

By the grace of our Lord, we will try in this article to explore the blessings and graces of pain and suffering that we must face as servants devoted to Jesus Christ our God. We might wonder with many, when humans suffer, where is the care of God the Lover of Mankind? Why do we see the righteous suffering, while the wicked are wealthy and in power? Why does God allow His children to undergo trials and tribulations?

We must submit to the will of God without much frivolous debate, for God's intentions are unfathomable even to the heavenly beings. " Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!" (Romans 11:33)

God, who loves mankind, His love is not emotional; it is not comparable to a mother's love for her infant, or a husband's love for his wife, or a lover to his beloved. It is a supreme, transcendent love, aimed at bringing humanity into the fellowship of eternal glory. Therefore, God does not wish pain for us, but He allows it for our betterment, to discipline or purify us, to bring us into the eternal inheritance. Essentially, God does not punish us; but He wants us to become better.

God allows sufferings for the righteous and even the saints. No one is like the Apostle Paul, and yet he spent his life in continuous pain, in sighs day and night. This was not a result of his sins, but in anticipation of the reward. And the wicked endure pains for discipline. In both cases, we thank God because He does not allow this out of vengeance or hatred, but as a sign of His care and concern for us.

Saint John Chrysostom says, "It behooves us not to waste our time with excessive questioning but rather to benefit practically, carrying a new strength through our union with God, so that no harm befalls us. For if you scrutinize the matters of God and do not wish to submit to His deep, inscrutable purposes, if you limit your quest to merely curious questions, then you will continue to wonder about many other things. Although, we ought not to delve into all this, but rather

submit to the wisdom of God which is beyond our understanding. For the person who loves and clings to God at all times is not harmed by the waves, no matter how many there are; on the contrary, he emerges from them with new strength. Whereas the weak, faint-hearted person falls frequently, even if there is nothing troubling him."

## **Blessings of Pain and Tribulations:**

### **1) Purification and Sanctification:**

- In times of pain, our purification becomes easier, like gold purified by fire. Pain strips away the impurities of pride, selfishness, and a nature burdened with worldly desires, leaving a heart more in tune with God's will.
- Pain is not random or meaningless but permitted by God for the purpose of sanctification. Through patience and faith, servants are transformed into purified vessels, ready and fit for use by the true Teacher and Shepherd.
- Being called to service and dedication does not necessarily mean we are ready for God's work! God called David through Samuel when he was still a young boy, showing His interest in having this child as king over Israel. However, David was not yet ready for the great mission the Lord God had for him. Thus, he was allowed to go through a melting pot at the hands of Saul, who was rejected by God. Yet, the Lord allowed David to stumble and be troubled until he was thoroughly purified and sanctified for the work, thereby becoming ready for use. With the Spirit of God, he says, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I may learn Your statutes." (Psalm 119:71).

### **2) Fellowship with Christ:**

- Pain and suffering provide servants with a unique opportunity to share in the sufferings of Christ. In Philippians 3:10, Saint Paul expresses his desire to "know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death."
- By partaking in Christ's sufferings, a servant deepens their closeness to Him and grows in understanding of His saving work. The Lord drank the cup to the end, and throughout all, He did not lose His composure, patience, courage, or love for His persecutors, providing us with a practical example to follow in His footsteps.
- Let us observe how Christ the Glory fulfilled the work of salvation to the cross with serenity, offering us the greatest lesson in surrender and nobility of spirit. One of the disciples betrays the Savior, the rest flee, those He benefitted spit on His face, the servant of the high priest strikes Him, the soldiers beat Him, passersby revile Him, and thieves rail at Him, yet throughout all this, He did not utter a word!
- "Who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, <sup>7</sup> but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. <sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point

of death, even the death of the cross.<sup>9</sup> Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name,<sup>10</sup> that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth,<sup>11</sup> and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Philippians 2:6-11)

### **3) Experiencing Strength in Weakness:**

- Paradoxically, pain and suffering can be a source of spiritual strength for faithful servants. As Saint Paul writes, 'He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."' (2 Corinthians 12:9).

- In moments of weakness, servants learn to rely more on God's grace and power. They discover that in their weakness, God's power is made more evident, enabling them to endure and continue their service with renewed zeal. "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us." (2 Corinthians 4:7).

- In moments of pain and distress, our holy fathers experienced the greatest spiritual experiences that would not have been possible during times of comfort and luxury. Saint John Chrysostom, speaking about the tribulations he faced, opens our eyes and comforts us by saying: What do others do to you?

- Do they rob you of your possessions? Remember these words: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart," and the apostle's saying, "For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it."

Have they maligned your reputation, hurling countless insults at you? Remember the saying, "Woe to you when all men speak well of you," (Luke 6:26) and also: "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake." (Matthew 5:11)

- Were you exiled? Remember that you have no lasting place here, but if you are wise, you should regard the whole world as foreign land! Consider the reward you receive for these things, for all these pains, when unjustly inflicted upon a person, serve to remove our sins and evils.

Therefore, the benefit of these trials is great for those who endure them courageously.

- Pain and suffering remove the distractions and illusions of this world, allowing servants to draw closer to God in intimacy and complete surrender. As the prophet says, "The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves such as have a contrite spirit." (Psalm 34:18).

- In times of distress, servants experience the comforting presence of God, finding solace and strength in detaching from all and clinging to the One. Through prayer, fasting, and meditation, they discover a closeness to God that transcends circumstances and hardships.

Once again, Saint John Chrysostom teaches us about experiencing distress, saying: When I was exiled from the city, I did not worry, but said to myself: If the empress wishes to exile me, let her

do so, for the earth belongs to the Lord! If she wants to slander me, I see Isaiah as a model! If she wants to throw me into the ocean, I think of Jonah! If I am to be thrown into the fire, I find the three young men who endured it in the furnace! If I am to be placed before wild beasts, I remember Daniel in the lions' den! If she wants to stone me, then Stephen, the first martyr, stands before me. And if she seeks my head, let her take it, for John the Baptist shines before me! Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall leave this world.

#### **4) Testing the Maturity of Faith:**

- The faith presented in the Bible always involves a dialectical balance between childlike faith, which always expects God to intervene to solve all problems and perform miracles, and mature faith, which continues to trust in God even if the problem is not solved or the distress is not lifted!

- A biblical example of balanced or mature faith: The stance of the three young men with King Nebuchadnezzar, " If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. <sup>18</sup> But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up." (Daniel 3:17-18)

In these verses, we see a complete statement about the concept of balanced and mature faith. The three young men expressed a childlike faith filled with confidence, hope, and certainty, " our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king." This is complete faith, but it is childlike in the sense that it is tied to a positive outcome!

However, we see a clarification that completes the true meaning of their full and mature faith with their statement, "But even if he does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold statue you have set up." This means that even if it was not God's will for them to be saved from the fiery furnace, it would not change their steadfast or mature faith stance.