

## Charismatic Churches and Their Attitude to Hardship

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by Max Aplin

***A major weakness in many charismatic churches today is the failure to recognize that hardship is part of what the New Testament describes as the normal, successful Christian life. This article addresses this issue, looking at the Biblical evidence.***



One of the major battles in the Christian life is to prevent things from becoming unbalanced. We must take care not to place too much emphasis on one aspect of the truth at the expense of another. For Christian leaders, this is clearly of especial importance, because lack of balance in what a leader teaches will inevitably result in others following suit.

I have become increasingly concerned that too many charismatic church leaders under-emphasize the importance and role of hardship in the Christian life. In fact, I would dare to suggest that, if the charismatic movement is considered as a whole, this may well be the greatest shortcoming in charismatic churches today. I do not say this as someone who is hostile to the charismatic movement. I am a charismatic, and I applaud the emphasis in charismatic churches on blessing and joy.

However, in tension with the joy side of the faith, the New Testament (not to mention the Old

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Testament) contains a huge number of references to and teaching on hardship and suffering being part of God's purposes for His children. To be sure, we can find examples of suffering that is caused by sin. In 1 Cor 11:17-30, for instance, we find that sickness and even death has come to some of the Corinthians because of their sins. However, this is the exception rather than the rule. In a large majority of references to hardship in the lives of Christians, there is no hint that anything is wrong in God's sight. In fact, in many places the hardship is actually seen as something positive.

We do not have space here to look at more than a fraction of the relevant passages, but it is worth setting out some of the more important of them:

In Luke 9:23 Jesus declares, 'If anyone wants to follow Me, he must deny himself and pick up his cross day by day and follow Me.' This daily picking up the cross seems plainly to imply hardship in what it means to follow Jesus from day to day.

In John 16:33 Jesus tells his disciples (and by implication all succeeding disciples), 'In the world you will have affliction, but be brave; I have overcome the world.' It is noteworthy how closely this teaching on hardship follows that on fullness of joy in v. 24.

In Acts 14:22 Paul and Barnabas warn the believers in Lycaonia and Pisidia: 'It is through many afflictions that we must enter the kingdom of God.' It seems much more natural to take this as a statement with continuing relevance rather than one that was applicable only to the Christians in these provinces at that time.

In Rom 8:17 Paul speaks of Christians as 'heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.' This is a striking statement about the importance of suffering in the Christian life.

In Phil 3:10 Paul speaks of his desire 'to know [Christ] and the power of His resurrection and a sharing in His sufferings . . .' This suggests that, spiritually, suffering can be a powerful force for good.

Finally, in Rev 1:9 John describes himself as a 'sharer in the affliction and kingdom and endurance that are in Jesus.' Again, the implication is that hardship is a normal part of the Christian life.

There are dozens of other examples that could be added to this list. A glance through the pages of the New Testament will demonstrate this. As far as the types of hardships experienced by Christians are concerned, they are seen to vary greatly. Persecution figures prominently (e.g., Matt 5:10-12; Acts 8:1-3; Heb 10:32-34; 1 Pet 2:19-23; Rev 2:10); material poverty also features (e.g., Luke 6:20; 2 Cor 6:10; 8:1-2; Phil 4:12; Jas 1:9; 2:5; Rev 2:9); and there are many passages in which the type of hardship is not defined, including numerous references to the importance of endurance. It is clear from the New Testament, then, that hardship is to be expected as a significant part of what constitutes following Jesus. In fact, we could see joy and hardship as two pillars of the normal, successful Christian life, pillars that are in tension with each other but in no way contradictory. See how joy and suffering are explicitly

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found together in 2 Cor 6:10; 7:4; 1 Thess 1:6; Col 1:24 and 1 Pet 1:6.

What, then, is the reason that Christians suffer in the will of God?

Firstly, hardship is simply a consequence of living in a fallen world. The world is under a curse, and it is inevitable that everyone who lives here will suffer, to a greater or lesser extent. Certainly, God often protects His children, but at times, in His perfect will, He does not.

Secondly, if Christians are engaged, as we should be, in conflict with evil spirits, it is inevitable that hardship will be involved. It would be completely unrealistic for us to expect to combat the powers of darkness without experiencing any painful consequences. Note how Eph 6:12 describes our conflict with Satan's forces as a 'struggle.' It is true that we have the power to be victorious, but this is not without cost.

Thirdly, according to the Bible, one of the major ways in which God purifies us morally is by leading us through hardships. In Rom 5:3-4, for example, Paul talks about rejoicing in his hardships, knowing that they are a means of developing moral fruit in his life. We find something very similar in 2 Cor 4:8-11; James 1:2-4 and 1 Pet 1:6-7.

Finally, there seems to be a mysterious way in which suffering in the life of the Christian can lead to increased spiritual power. In 2 Cor 12:9-10 Paul speaks of his gladness in experiencing sufferings, since these weaken him in a non-spiritual sense, thereby enabling him to be strong spiritually.

Hardship is therefore something that is inevitable in the life of someone who is following Jesus, and, moreover, is something that God uses to work out His purposes through us.

It is important, then, that Christian leaders do not neglect teaching about the importance and role of hardship in the Christian life. Too often in charismatic churches this teaching is underemphasized, and when it is, problems arise. Christians who encounter troubles in their lives that are not quickly resolved can be told, or at least led to believe, that their sufferings must be because of some unconfessed sin. Now, of course, in many instances sin is the cause of suffering. However, in many instances it is not, and in these cases it is very damaging for the person in question to be criticized, when what they really need is encouragement.

The same thing can happen to whole churches. Corporate hardships arise, and if it is taught that joy, and not hardship, should be the order of the day (instead of both being part of the normal Christian life), a feeling of disillusionment can set in among a congregation. Sometimes, however, I am sure that the corporate sufferings which arise are actually because a church is making spiritual progress. Something that should be a reason for optimism can, through poor teaching, therefore become a cause of discouragement.

As well as the need to be aware that hardships need not suggest that anything is wrong in God's sight, there is the other side of the coin to consider too. Suffering is such a fundamental part of the Christian life as it is found in the New Testament, that if, for a considerable period of time, a Christian has no significant suffering in his or her life, it may well be that something is

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seriously wrong with their Christian walk. I therefore believe it is important for church leaders to encourage any Christian who has insignificant hardship to seek God's face to discover if something might have gone awry. If a Christian has little joy in their life, something has probably gone wrong. The same is surely true of hardship.

The charismatic movement has been a real force for God's work in the world. The stress on the importance of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, especially healing and prophecy, is entirely justified, as is the emphasis on joy and blessing. However, I am convinced that many charismatic churches would be much stronger, if the importance of hardship were included prominently in teaching on what constitutes a normal Christian life. Too often this has been downplayed, and God's church is the weaker as a result.

*I have been a Christian for over 25 years. I have a Ph.D. in New Testament Language, Literature and Theology from the University of Edinburgh. I am a UK national and I currently live in the south of Scotland.*

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