

The sufferings of Bahá'u'lláh and their significance

By George Townshend, MA¹

The *Prayers and Meditations of Bahá'u'lláh* which the beloved Guardian has given us is in large measure an intimate remembrance of the Redeemer's sufferings. And Bahá'u'lláh wished us to meditate on these sufferings. In the Tablet of Ahmad He says: "*Remember My days during thy days, and My distress and banishment in this remote prison.*"

In a great poem known as the Fire Tablet He records at length the tale of His calamities and writes at the close:

"Thank the Lord for this Tablet whence thou canst breathe the fragrance of My meekness and know what hath beset Us in the path of God." He adds: "*Should all the servants read and ponder this, there shall be kindled in their veins a fire that shall set aflame the world.*"

True religion in all ages has called on the faithful to suffer. On the one hand it brings to mankind a happiness in the absolute and the everlasting which is found nowhere but in religion. No unbeliever knows any joy which in its preciousness can be compared to the joys of religion. "The true monk," it has been said, "brings nothing with him but his lyre."

On the other hand Heaven is walled about with fire. This bliss must be bought at a great price. So it has ever been in all religions of mankind.

An ancient hymn of India proclaims a truth as real now as it was in distant times:

The way of the Lord is for heroes. It is not meant for cowards.

Offer first your life and your all. Then take the name of the Lord.

He only tastes of the Divine Cup who gives his son, his wife, his wealth and his own life.

He verily who seeks for pearls must dive to the bottom of the sea, endangering his very existence.

Death he regards as naught; he forgets all the miseries of mind and body.

He who stands on the shore, fearing to take the plunge, attains naught.

The path of love is the ordeal of fire. The shrinkers learn from it.

Those who take the plunge into the fire attain eternal bliss.

Those who stand afar off, looking on, are scorched by the flames.

Love is a priceless thing only to be won at the cost of death.

Those who live to die, those attain; for they have shed all thoughts of self.

Those heroic souls who are rapt in the love of the Lord, they are the true lovers.

All the founders of religions have had to endure rejection and wrong, and as mankind grew more and more mature and the victory of God nearer, these wrongs, these sufferings have grown more and more severe continually.

We read little if anything of martyrdom in the Old Testament. But the New opens with Herod's slaughter of the innocents, his beheading of John the Baptist; its central figure is a Man of Sorrows acquainted with grief. The Gospels close with the agony in Gethsemane and with the Cross, the Nails, the Spear, and history follows with the martyrdom of all the eleven apostles. The Báb Himself was martyred and His followers gave up their lives for love of Him, not by dozens only but by hundreds and by thousands. In establishing the victory of God

¹ *The Bahá'í World*, vol. XII, 1950-1954, pp. 856-9.

Bahá'u'lláh and Abdul-Bahá drank the cup of suffering to the dregs.

It is said there are three kinds of martyrdom: one is to stand bravely and meet death unflinchingly in the path of God without wavering or under torture denying for an instant their faith. The second is little by little to detach one's heart entirely from the world, laying aside deliberately and voluntarily all vanities and worldly seductions, letting every act and word become a speaking monument and a fitting praise for the Holy Name of Bahá'u'lláh. The third is to do the most difficult things with such self-sacrifice that all behold it as your pleasure. To seek and to accept poverty with the same smile as you accept fortune. To make the sad, the sorrowful your associates instead of frequenting the society of the careless and gay. To yield to the decrees of God and to rejoice in the most violent calamities even when the suffering is beyond endurance. He who can fulfill these last conditions becomes a martyr indeed.

None can attempt to delineate the variety or to analyze the nature of the afflictions which were poured upon Bahá'u'lláh. Repeatedly He has Himself summarized them in a few brief powerful sentences. In one place He calls our particular attention to the fact that it was not the Black Dungeon of Tíhrán, for all its horrors and chains, which He named the Most Great Prison. He gave that name to 'Akká. We are left to surmise why, and we reflect that in the Black Pit His sufferings were chiefly personal and physical; His enemies were external foes, the hope of redeeming the Cause was still with Him. But when He went down to 'Akká in 1868, the traitor Mírzá Yahyá had done his deadly work; the kings and leaders had definitely rejected the Message, He was definitely cast out and silenced. Not He Himself alone but the Cause of God was in prison.

We can never imagine what numberless possibilities of immediate redemption the mad, sad, bad world had wantonly flung away; nor can our less sensitive natures know what the anguish of this frustration must have been to the eager longing of a heart as divinely centered, divinely loving as His.

But this much is abundantly plain; that the pains, the griefs, the sorrows, the sufferings, the rejections, the betrayals, the frustrations which were the common lot of all the High Prophets reached their culmination in Him.

Yet through all He remained calm, confident, his courage unshaken, his acquiescence forever radiant.

No one is to imagine that the excess of His tribulations means that at any time the power of evil had prevailed against Him. Pondering as He would have us to do, over the significance of these afflictions, we are shown that the truth is quite otherwise. He reveals:

*"Had not every tribulation been made the bearer of Thy wisdom, and every ordeal the vehicle of Thy providence, no one would have dared oppose Us, though the powers of heaven and earth were to be leagued against Us."*² He writes that God had sacrificed Him that men might be born anew and released from their bondage to sin. He praises God for His sufferings, He welcomes them, and even prays that for God's sake the earth should be dyed with His blood and His head raised on a spearpoint. He continually protests that with every fresh tribulation heaped upon Him He manifests a fuller measure of God's Cause and exalts more highly still God's Word.

How bitterly felt were His tribulations, how acute His anguish, how real His grief and pain is shown a hundred times in His laments. His high divinity did not protect Him from human sensibility, but never did He quail nor blanch, never did He show resentment.

Many of His laments are not over His woes themselves but over the effect they produce on the faithful whose hearts they sorely shook or on the enemies of the Cause whom they fill with joy.

Nothing could exhaust His patience nor dampen His spirit. *"Though My body be pained by the trials that befall Me from Thee, though it be afflicted by the revelation of Thy Decree, yet My soul rejoiceth"*³ He affirms that the tribulations that He and the faithful are made to endure are such as no pen in the entire creation can record, nor anyone describe. Yet *"We swear by Thy Might Every trouble that toucheth us in our love for Thee is an evidence of Thy tender mercy, every fiery ordeal a sign of the brightness of Thy light, every woeful tribulation a cooling draught, every toil a blissful repose, every anguish a fountain of gladness."*⁴

How then is it that "by Thy stripes we are healed?"

² Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations*, p. 14.

³ idem, p. 95.

⁴ idem, p. 135.

It is because the intensity, the magnitude, the volume of the sufferings of Bahá'u'lláh called forth the fullest possible expression and outpouring of the infinite mercy and love of God.

Wrongs done to the founder of a religion have two inevitable effects: one is that of retribution against the wrong done—the severity of which we may judge from the two thousand year exile of the Jewish people. The other is that of reward to the High Prophet whom they enable to release fresh powers of life that would have otherwise lain latent, to pour forth Divine energies which in their boundlessness will utterly overwhelm the forces of evil and empower Him to say: “Be of good cheer. I have overcome the world.”

The sufferings of Bahá'u'lláh enable us in some degree to measure the immensity of His love for mankind, to appreciate the sacrifice He made for love of us. The story of them enables us to keep in remembrance the heinous blackness and cruelty of the world of man from which He saved us; it enables us to realize the meaning and the need of Divine redemption, it proves to us the invincibility of God and the lone majesty of God's victory over evil.

It is for the sake of learning more fully the love and the glory and the might of God that we contemplate this story of Bahá'u'lláh's tribulations.

In that spirit we are to read it, and as a proof of His triumphant inviolable love He keeps the picture before us in many forms that we may be fortified and uplifted in our poor human struggle with the tests and afflictions of life.

The Fire Tablet adds all the poignancy and impassioned power of divine poetry to the story of the boundless suffering He and His beloved followers had to endure. In language of torrential eloquence He tells of the longing, of the faithful for reunion with God being ungratified, He tells of the casting out of those most near to His heart, of dying bodies, of frustrated lovers left afar to perish in loneliness, of Satan's whisperings in every human ear, of infernal delusions spreading everywhere, of the triumph of calamity, darkness, and coldness of heart. He tells of the sovereignty in every land of hate and unbelief while He Himself is forbidden to speak, left in the loneliness of His anguish, drowning in a sea of pain with no rescue ship to come and save Him. The light of honor and loyalty and truth are put out; slander prevails and no avenging wrath of an outraged God descends to destroy the wicked and vindicate God's messenger.

He calls to God for an answer. And the answer comes, showing the inner significance of God's seeming to forsake His righteous ones.

Man's evil sets off God's goodness. Man's coldness of heart sets off the warmth of God's love.

Were it not for the night, how would the sun of the Prophet's valor show forth the splendor of its radiance? Through His loneliness, the unity of God was revealed; through His banishment, the world of divine singleness grew fair.

“We have made abasement,” said God to Him, *“the garment of glory, and affliction the adornment of Thy temple. O Pride of the worlds. Thou seest the hearts are filled with hate, and to overlook is Thine, O Thou Concealer of the sins of the worlds. When the swords flash, go forward! When the shafts fly, press onward! O Thou Sacrifice of the worlds.”*⁵

In that battle which we all of us wage with pain and suffering and sorrow, those are God's last words to us:

*Where the swords flash, go forward;
Where the shafts fly, press onward.*⁶

For love is a priceless thing, only to be won at the cost of death. Those who live to die, those attain; for they have lost all thoughts of self. Those heroic souls who are rapt in the love of the Lord, they are the true lovers.

⁵ Bahá'u'lláh in *Bahá'i Prayers*, pp. 218–9.

⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, ‘Fire Tablet’, in *Bahá'i Prayers*, p. 218.