

Suffering, Serving and Jesus Christ, Colossians 1:23-29

June 8, 2008 - Skip MacMillan

Suffering

The most unpopular message.

Passages on suffering: Rom. 5:1-5, 1 Cor. 1, Matthew 24, 1 Peter 4, James 1:1-4

Paul's Sufferings

“. . . been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from the rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches” (2 Cor. 11:23-28).

Between the lines:

- Relationally in no-man's-land: rejected by the Jewish community and hesitantly received by the Church
- Suffered memories of the pain and suffering he caused others prior to Christ redeeming him (Acts 9)
- Suffered for the message of God's grace over works and serving the Gentile people
- He will suffer imprisonment for the Gospel, but there he will write many letters of the New Testament.
- Suffering never moved Paul from the hope held out in the gospel (Colossians 1:23)
- Paul suffered for Christ, Christ's Church, Christ's Mission and for his obedience to Christ.
- Not to suffer for suffering sake, life is not miserable in Christ. Paul says he rejoices in his suffering.

“I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions for the sake for His body”

Not Christ's redemptive sufferings, not that “Christ's atonement is defective and that sufferings of the saints are needed to supplement his work on our behalf. . . . Paul did not regard the death of Jesus as lacking in efficacy. That death was complete, once for all, and wholly adequate to meet man's need” -Vaughan, 190.

What Paul means is “Christ's ministerial afflictions, not his mediatorial redemptive sufferings. . . . (but) the tribulations our Lord endured in the course of his life and ministry. The sufferings his people endure are a continuation of what he endured (in His life), and in that sense they complete his afflictions.”

Jesus said we would continue in suffering:

“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: ‘No servant is greater than his master’. If they persecuted me they will persecute you also” (John 15:18-21).

Believers in Christ no longer face the wrath of God but now face the wrath of the world. Those once loved and befriended by the world are now hated and persecuted.

By living for Christ, you are living contrary to the flow of a fallen world. Therefore resistance and difficulties are to be expected and will continue to occur until all of creation is fully redeemed at the second coming of Christ.

An additional way of looking at this:

Jesus suffered throughout His life and most intensely in the hours before and during the Cross. Isa. 53:3

His physical body suffered most intensely up to and during the events of the Cross, (His first advent).

Jesus Christ equates Himself with His Church in Acts 9:4 - "Why do you persecute Me?" Just as Jesus' physical body suffered throughout His life and increasingly so at the close of His life (first advent) so His Body (the church) will suffer and increasingly so as the time of His second advent approaches. Matthew 24:9.

As the greatest suffering in Christ's life came during the build up and fulfillment of the Cross, so suffering will increase as we near the return of Christ. Suffering for Christ means you are participating in the prelude of His glorious second coming. Paul understood this and anticipated Christ's return.

Our Suffering

Do we suffer for Christ?

1 Peter 4:12-19

What do we suffer for?

Bad decisions regarding finances, relationships, morality, some murder, steal, and meddle. For these you suffer because there are consequences for sin.

Critical to have your life based on Christ's commandments and priorities

Then you can connect your suffering to His causes, His ways and His church. When your life is based on Christ's commands, then your suffering can be attributed to Him. The problem comes when we suffer for the consequences of our own sin.

How might we suffer rightly?

For God

For the purposes and mission of God
For the name of Christ
Suffering for following Christ's commands, living the Christian life, for obedience to Christ
Suffering so the Gospel can go out, to make Christ known

For Others

Suffering the burden of a friend who is without hope and without Christ; seeing their brokenness due to the fall and sin, knowing the answer yet experiencing their rejection of Christ.

Suffering the burden of a broken world: starving children, corrupt governments, politicians and dictatorships, wars, greed, the overall depravity of humanity; while remembering what once was in the Garden of Eden and what will be One day when Christ redeems all things, Rev. 21.

Personally

Temptation, suffering the wrestling between wanting to do good but persistently tempted to do wrong.

Romans 7:18-19

"I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing."

Marriage, staying and trying because of Christ's call to love and forgive even though things are extremely difficult; this is suffering for Christ, His ways and commands.

Priorities, suffering the consequences at work for giving time to your family, church, and community.

Financially, doing with less than your neighbor because you're giving to advance and strengthen God's Kingdom.

Value in Christ, struggling to hold onto your value in Christ, that you are enough, although you're told repeatedly your not "enough" not thin enough, good enough, smart enough, cool enough or whatever other "enoughs" we are told we lack. It is difficult and we struggle to live in the truth of our value in Christ.

Relationships, those who were once family or friends distance themselves from you, confront your new-found "religion," parents mocking, others saying hurtful things because you are now a follower of Christ: you are suffering for Christ.

Spiritual attack simply because you belong to Him.

If you suffer for these reasons, you are suffering for Christ.

If however, there are no discernable indications of suffering in your life, I challenge you to follow Christ until it stings!

Try loving more, giving more generously, depending more on Him, be quicker to forgive, slower to speak negatively about others, try being less cynical and sarcastic, less arrogant and more humble, less selfish and more selfless, try thinking of others before yourself, try praying more deeply and trusting Christ readily.

Explore doing something to make the gospel go out, to make Christ known.

Set your priorities to God, People and Scripture and live it.

As you follow Christ, living as He lived, doing what He did, you will experience some degree of suffering.

In the very least it will cost you time, energy, money and priorities.

Rejoicing in Suffering:

Learning to play guitar, dieting and exercise and financial planning--
Require discipline, pain, sweat, tears, denial of self, focus and attention, commitment, a bigger vision.

Rejoicing comes when you know you are suffering for Jesus Christ as found in Colossians 1:15-18.

Rejoicing comes when you know you are suffering for the good of His church, His bride whom He loves.

Rejoicing comes when our suffering and sacrifice helps others to discover real hope in Christ.

We rejoice in suffering because we remember the words of Christ and are reaffirmed that we belong to Him. “. . .they hated and persecuted Me, they will hate and persecute you” (John 15:18-21).

We rejoice in suffering for Christ because we are a part of something larger than this world.

Jesus speaks of rewards for those who have given and suffered for Him, Mark 10:29-34.

Paul even desired to share in Christ’s suffering more fully, Phil. 3:10.

How do we obtain this perspective?

1. “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us . . . we groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom. 8:18, 23).
2. 2 Cor. 4:16-18
“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

What must that glory be like if not worth comparing to the worst suffering we’ve experienced?

3. Hebrews 12:1-3
“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

Our focused attention on Jesus Christ through difficulties generates great endurance, perseverance, patience, courage, and power in us, spiritual maturity.

Being a Servant. Serving the Body

“I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness”

Jesus said He came to serve; He is our example.

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

Serving people, believer and unbeliever alike; giving of Himself, time, wisdom, love. Going from place to place, healing, feeding, and revealing the long awaited hope of glory, the Messiah.

Jesus, said the greatest followers are those who serve, Mark 10:41-44.

"Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all."

Those who serve are strong, confident, who know who they are in Christ, are willing to serve.

The strong in Christ are those who serve, the opposite of our culture.

Commission by God

God commissioned Paul, called Paul (Acts 9). God set Paul's course to serve His church, the community and the world.

God has commissioned you as a believer in Jesus Christ to serve His church, the community and the world.

He has called you by name, just as He did Saul, now Paul (Acts 9:4).

Paul's Specific calling of God:

Paul's calling was "to present to you the Word of God in its fullness".

"The word of God" is the Scriptures, Genesis to Revelation.

"The word of God is for Paul a power let loose in the world, embodied in the true gospel message (1:6)" -NT Wright.

Col. 1:6 - "the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing."

"in its fullness," "Mystery," "Glorious riches," "hope of glory" are all pointing to and fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Mystery is "God's secret plan, anticipated in visions and symbols by holy men of old, and now at last unveiled before all his people." God's secret plan is His Son Jesus Christ (NT Wright).

"God is revealed in Jesus Christ as Lord of the whole world, its sovereign and loving Creator and Redeemer" -NT Wright.

Today's ministers need this reminder

"Him we proclaim" (v. 28) these words serve, for Christian preachers and teachers, as a constant reminder of their central calling, not (first and foremost) to comment on current affairs or to alleviate human problems, good and necessary as those activities may be, but to announce that Jesus is Lord" -NT Wright.

Jesus Christ "in you":

Meaning, "in your midst" and "within you".

Not on some mountain, locale, in a temple, in another county, out in space, but with you and in you (John 14-16).

You are the new temple, the Spirit of God is dwelling in you.

This is the greatest message of all time: God loves, justifies, redeems, forgives, resides in, and glorifies you. Rom. 8:10-11.

“admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ”

Admonishing: correcting

Teaching: positive sense

“He (Jesus Christ) is indeed the embodiment of divine wisdom, but the exploration of the wisdom that resides in him is the task of a lifetime, and even so the most enlightened of mortals can only ‘know in part’ (1 Cor. 13:9). It is necessary, then, not only to preach the gospel but also, when people have believed the gospel, to ‘instruct everyone and teach everyone in all wisdom’ ” -FF Bruce.

This message of Christ and all its depth is for all and attainable by all.

“There are no heights in Christian attainment which are not within the reach of all, by the power of heavenly grace” -FF Bruce.

Perfect in Christ = Maturing in Christ; that is trusting, believing, oriented, calling on, serving in the name of, finding our value in Jesus Christ.

Not perfection in the sense of sinlessness but in maturity, Phil. 3:13-14.

Maturing in our understanding and lifestyles that resemble His.

“to this end I labor, struggling with all His energy which so powerfully works in me.”

Paradox of Divine sovereignty and human responsibility

We give it all we have, hard work, human effort, going after the mission with all that we have within, knowing that the God who dwells in you is giving you the energy and strength to accomplish his will.

1 Cor. 15:5 and 1 Peter 4:11.

“Paul does not go about his work half-heartedly, hoping vaguely that grace will fill in the gaps which he is too lazy to work at himself. Nor, however, does he imagine that it is all up to him, so that unless he burns himself out with restless, anxious toil nothing will be achieved. He knows that God’s desire is to bring Christians to maturity, and that God has called him to have a share in that work. He can therefore work hard without the stressful motivation of either pride or fear. He thus becomes an example of that maturity, both human and Christian, that he seeks under God to produce in others” -NT Wright.

Paul is not doing this of his own calling, not of his own strength or energy. Paul is a man called by God, rescued by Christ, saved by God, empowered by God to serve God’s church, to preach the Gospel, to admonish, to teach God’s people so that they will mature in the faith.

Closing:

We need to continue creating an environment where serving, sacrificing, and suffering are lifted up.

Suffering and serving are consistent themes in the life of Christ and consistent with what Jesus said would happen.

We are to serve the body, serve the community, and serve the world.