

THE "CHRIST SIDE" OF SUFFERING, PHIL.1:12-26

Letters from Prison #2

◆ **Intro:** Many years ago, April of 1997, a sixth grader named Paul died in tragic bus accident in our town. All ten ministers of town were called to the Middle School in the aftermath to speak with hurting students. I talked with a group of sixth grade young girls who were in tears and full of questions. At one point I inquired as to if they would find it all easier to handle if they knew there was a good reason for Paul's death. They each thought it would be.

◆ Part of me agrees. Purpose gives things meaning, especially difficult things. People will go through extraordinary things if there is a good enough reason. And often we hear people talk sadly of a "senseless tragedy", as though if there were some sense to it, it'd be more palatable. I want to give some reasons, make some sense of, suffering today as an encouragement. But I also want to admit that a part of me is not sure good reasons would make it any easier if the tragedy happened to my own boy. I don't feel confident I could handle such a loss, not without the help of heaven, that's for sure. So while there can be good reasons embedded in bad situations, I also agree that to weather such things requires more than you or I possess. That my friends is another reason for a living relationship with God; God enables you to take much more than you are able.

◆ **1.** One thing is clear: suffering is inevitable in a fallen world. Now some folks play that to their advantage. Did you cut your finger while using your MasterCard? Let us help you sue them!

THE "CHRIST SIDE" OF SUFFERING, PHIL.1:12-26

Letters from Prison #2

Did you spill hot coffee on your lap and get burned? Let's sue the restaurant, and the coffee company, and the transporter, and... you should sue for emotional trauma as well! Somebody ought to pay! or so our culture says. It's actually a non-Christian world view that believes suffering and pain is abnormal and ought be avoided at all costs. **Suffering...**(this is going to throw some of you)...**is actually a part of the Christian vocation!** Before you disregard the idea, lets consider some Scriptures.

◆ In Acts 9 we read the account of Paul's conversion. He is struck blind on the road. Jesus sends Ananias to say, what? "I want you to tell Paul what a great success he will be as a missionary? I want you to show him what a great name he will have, what heights of fame he'll reach, and how much of the Bible he'll end up writing for me?" Nope. Lets see...

◆ *"But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.""* Acts 9:15, 16, NIV.

◆ Why does God plan to have Paul suffer? (Hint; it's not payback.) And then there's our letter to the Philippians. In our text what does v29 say?

◆ "For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake," Philippians 1:29, NASB.

THE "CHRIST SIDE" OF SUFFERING, PHIL.1:12-26

Letters from Prison #2

- ◆ In chapter 3:10 Paul says he *wants* to suffer like Christ!
 - ◆ *"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead."* Philippians 3:10, 11, NIV.
- ◆ Huh?! Now, one might say, "Yeah preacher, but that's talking about suffering for the gospel, or for the name of Christ. We know we're called to take that, but what about miscellaneous suffering, not for the gospel." To that I reply, we are not called just to suffer because we are Christians, but to suffer as we are Christians. That is, we are called to live and experience the difficulties of life as people of the way, as followers of Jesus. We are absorbers of evil!
- ◆ God has ordained it such that the path to blessing passes through buffeting. God's glory shines like a lit billboard in the dark of night. Still wondering about that calling?
 - ◆ *Now if we are children, then we are heirs --heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. Rom 8:17*
- ◆ It's like this: you can't be resurrected if you haven't died, right? Now I know what you're thinking? Why in the world did God go and set up the equation of human life so that it included pain, and suffering? Let me tell you a story.
 - ◆ John Payton was a student in England finishing up a semester when God said to him, "Go to the New Hebrides."

THE "CHRIST SIDE" OF SUFFERING, PHIL.1:12-26

Letters from Prison #2

This was a bit of a shock to John. The New Hebrides were known to be full of peoples that practiced cannibalism. Are you sure God? Yes. So he and his young wife sailed to the New Hebrides islands. They didn't know the language. It was there that his wife bore their first child, but tropical disease took it's life with in two weeks. Two days later his wife died. Here is a quote from his writings. "I slept on their graves for three nights to keep the natives from digging them up and eating them... God, how far does love go? How far does obedience and commitment to Christ have to go?"

◆ That brings us to one of the various reasons behind suffering. First let me say that you and I know nothing in comparison to the wisdom of God. And God's wisdom is so far beyond ours that he may have a multitude of reasons for every difficulty he allows to come into our lives. And while there are more reasons we can and will observe, here is a central understanding, a central reason.

◆2. Enduring suffering displays the reality of the power of God.

◆ *"We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead." 2 Corinthians 1:8, 9, NIV.*

THE "CHRIST SIDE" OF SUFFERING, PHIL.1:12-26

Letters from Prison #2

◆ Now don't get me wrong. I'd like not to suffer just as much as the next guy, but Christians live to the glory of their savior. There is something unique about suffering that displays that. That is one of the reasons God uses it. Love enduring through suffering captures the human heart with its reality. That reality is love. Let's break it down.

◆ **A.** CS Lewis is famous for saying that God whispers to us in our pleasures but shouts to us in our pain. That for one: suffering/pain makes us look for God! which is one reason our nation is as secular and morally lost as it is; we don't suffer much, so we don't look for God much. We don't feel much need. And it's one reason God graciously allows suffering.

◆ Now to anyone listening that has not become a member of God's family I have some questions: When your world caves in, what do you have to hang on to? Who do you have to lean on? Where can you turn? What is your hope? In other words, how good is the god you run to? Suffering makes us ask the questions.

◆ **B.** But on top of that, suffering/pain endured graciously truly opens people's eyes to the *reality* of the God who enables that.

◆ Partially God lets you hurt and flounder so that you look for him and *learn* that you can depend on *him* to create life out of death. Here's what he said to the Apostle Paul when he asked for removal of a certain pain.

THE "CHRIST SIDE" OF SUFFERING, PHIL.1:12-26

Letters from Prison #2

◆ *"But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me." 2 Corinthians 12:9, NIV.*

◆ And now I'm speaking to those who call themselves followers of Jesus. For you, suffering is a prime opportunity, it is your stage par excellence to witness to your world for Christ. Know why? Few people suffer well, these days especially. We think we are entitled to the luxuries we are used to. We expect someone to fix it for us, or pay for us, or to solve it for us. And even when this is not the case, it still remains true that when people endure great hardship with quiet, confidence in Christ, people outside the family of God see the bareness of their own souls. The Spirit of Jesus makes it "turn out for salvation" (v19). The gracious endurance of suffering has explosive power. Take Paul as example.

◆ v12 *"What has happened"?* Well, Paul is in prison in Rome where he will eventually be beheaded by Emperor Nero. But for two years he lived under house arrest and was free to talk with anyone who would listen.

◆ v30 *the struggle you saw I had"*: What was that? Well, it's all in Acts 16, when Paul was in prison in their city, Philippi! Where Paul and Silas were singing in jail. Where the Lord shook the prison and the chains fell off all the inmates. Where the jailer was about to commit suicide because the

THE "CHRIST SIDE" OF SUFFERING, PHIL.1:12-26

Letters from Prison #2

Romans would kill anyone who let a prisoner escape anyway. But what happened there? The Jailer became a Christian and so did his family. What softened his heart? Watching Paul and Silas treated shamefully, yet behaving with dignity. Watching them live with hurt but also hope, so much so, that when they were suddenly free, they did not flee AND neither did any of the other inmates!! *When someone handles hurt with hope, it can rock others to the core!* And they start to wonder "Maybe he/she knows something that could help me face the brokenness of life."

◆C. Suffering gives you an audience with hurting people! And let me let you in on something: everyone is a hurting person in some fashion. It's a universal condition in a sinful world. We all are hurting. *Your pain is precisely where God can bless others.* When you've lost your wife and a friend goes through the same thing, you are the person who can truly say "I know how you feel." And if you found strength and endurance from God, you have something to share. But they will not likely listen to someone else.

◆Know what people think when you try to encourage them in say, loss of a job, or loss of a son to cancer, etc.? They think, "That's easy for you to say, but you have no idea what I'm going through." We feel alone in our deep pains. That's why the best comforters are people who've been there themselves.

THE "CHRIST SIDE" OF SUFFERING, PHIL.1:12-26

Letters from Prison #2

◆[By the way, this is how you form your testimony! - especially those of us who always knew Christ from childhood and can't say, "Well before I met Jesus I sold drugs to kids, robbed for the fun of it, and was pretty much perpetually drunk." What you *can* point to are any of the pains or troubles Jesus has taken you through in life! Any place you needed to lean on the power of God and experienced it. Those are all pieces of your conversion, you see?...Jesus helped me stay married... Jesus taught me to love my hateful neighbor... Jesus keeps me from greed and discontent...] So suffering gives you an audience with fellow sufferers.

◆D. Suffering can raise our level of compassion for sufferers. I say "can" because we do not always cooperate with this lesson. But as God has compassion on men and women, so he commands his own to share that compassion. Parents, do not pray that your kids will never suffer. Pray instead that God will guard them and grown them in their suffering. If they do not hurt for anything, or suffer anything, they may never learn to feel anything for those who do. People who have lost children hurt for other people who have lost children. People who have dealt with cancer are more aware of people dealing with cancer. And so on.

◆The converse is also true. If you have rarely sought God for help and direction, or rarely been desperate for God's help, or have not truly appreciated God's intervention in

THE "CHRIST SIDE" OF SUFFERING, PHIL.1:12-26

Letters from Prison #2

your life, you are likely someone who has nothing to say, and therefore never thinks about sharing your faith with a friend. Listen, the point at which you needed God is the point of contact you have with others in need!

◆ **Conclusion:** Let me return to that story of missionary John Payton in the New Hebrides Islands. Did God turn out that loss for anything good? Well, John became friends with an outcast of one of the tribes. That fellow taught John the language. John stayed in the islands for thirty-five years! They all would come to know why he came, and at what cost. Later he would write the following: "I don't know of a single native who has not made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ!"

◆ Suffering isn't fun, but suffering for Christ and as a Christian is our calling.

◆ *"Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope." Romans 5:3, 4, NIV.*

◆ Paul is telling us that there are good things in the universe that come out of suffering that don't come into existence in any other way. Suffering makes people look for hope. Hope resides with God. Suffering has a unique ability to open the heart to the spiritual realm, mine and other's too. And there we find a God of such love that he would suffer his son's death to win an answer to yours. Do not fear suffering. Only ask God to take you through it and bring his name glory in it.