

The Sufferings of Christ

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Part II

September 2005

In Part I of this article we examined the reasons why Christ needed to suffer as well as the different ways He suffered. Let us now continue by examining how we, as believers, are called to suffer with Christ.

Suffering With Christ

As Christians, we know that Christ's death and resurrection ended for all time spiritual death for those of us through the ages who have been and are His followers. Christ's shed blood was the complete work of redemption. We need do nothing more than simply believe on the name of Jesus to be saved. Yet we have Scriptures that state that the things we suffer somehow add to Christ's work. Note the words of the Apostle Paul.

"Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church." (Col 1:24 NIV.)

Paul seems to be saying that he is glad that he was able to suffer for the church in Colossae. It appears that he believed that his own suffering somehow supplemented Jesus' suffering! Again, Paul wrote,

"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 . . ." (Phi 3:10 NIV, emphasis added.)

For years, I just couldn't understand these passages and I often asked God to reveal their meaning to me. God is faithful to answer our requests when the answer leads us to a better understanding of Him and His word.

As Christians We Are Called to Suffer

Peter wrote,

" . . . But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. *To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you*, leaving you an example, that *you should follow in his steps*. (1 Pe 2:20,21 NIV, emphasis added.)

So Peter makes it quite clear that Christians are called to suffer for Christ. We are to follow His example and the pathway He left for us.

Have you ever done something good in your church or Christian community only to have people criticize and pick your good deed apart? Well, Peter might say to you, "What did you expect? Look what they did to Jesus! 'However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.'" (1 Pe 4:16 NIV)

The Privilege of the Fellowship of Suffering With Christ

A few years ago I was watching the national news on TV. The program focused on the anniversary of a major military victory for American forces during World War II. We fought one of the bloodiest battles of that war on the island of Guadalcanal. The battle lasted for months and thousands of Marines died in it. The news crew had flown many surviving veterans to Guadalcanal to celebrate the 50th anniversary of that victory. They planned to capture the reunion of those old, battle-hardened Marines on camera when they met for the first time after fifty years.

As I watched, these old veterans would recognize one another, embrace, and start crying. I could see that the bond of fellowship among them was extraordinary and the passing years hadn't diminished it. At that moment I understood that the source of that powerful, common bond was *what they had suffered together!*

Then the Holy Spirit spoke to me. He told me that this is what it means to *share in the fellowship of the sufferings of Christ!* Like Paul, if we enter into the sufferings of Christ, we also enter that fellowship. And this fellowship surpasses any human bond or fellowship. Why? Because it is divine. I believe this understanding by Paul became one of the forces that drove him forward through all the hardships and sufferings of his ministry.

What is the Value of Our Suffering with Christ?

But our flesh certainly doesn't like this message, does it? Or should I say, "Do we?" It's in the nature of our humanity to ask, "What's in this for me?" Well, let's look to Scripture for some answers to this question.

1. Die to Self Through Suffering

Paul gave us his personal testimony concerning dying to self when he wrote, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Gal 2:20 NIV)

I don't think there is anything like suffering to help us die to ourselves, our desires, our ambitions, our own agendas, etc. It's time that we Christians reappraise the hardships and maltreatment we often get from both the world and our brothers and sisters in the church. I'm sure those who provoke and antagonize us don't realize that they are helping us to die to self through what we suffer.

2. Co-heirs with Christ Through Suffering

Paul adds another dimension to our sufferings with Christ.

"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 NIV, emphasis added.)

Paul is telling us that if we want to share in all that Jesus was able to do and be, we must also share in His sufferings. My wife, Carolyn, is a retired attorney. She tells me that “co-heirs” is a legal term meaning that every person in the designated group inherits the same amount. That means that as co-heirs with Jesus, everything He inherited from the Father, *we also can inherit!* But note that Paul added that “if” in his statement, saying that *if* we share in His sufferings, only then do we share in His full inheritance. (Remember, salvation is not the issue here. If you have received Christ as your Savior, Jesus saved you. The issue is the *fullness* of His inheritance.) What is that full inheritance? The short answer is that we become more and more Christlike, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (See Eph 4:13.)

3. We Share in His Glory

For years I have heard it said that God will not share His glory with another, often using Scripture to point out someone with undue pride. (See Isa 42:8.) Yet in Romans Paul is telling us that we *can* share in His glory! “. . . heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we *share in his suffering in order that we may also share in his glory.*” (Rom 8:17 NIV)

Isaiah tells us God will not share His glory with *idols*. (See Isaiah 42:8) But He will with His own children! Paul states, “And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” (2 Co 3:18 NIV)

Clearly then, Paul is teaching us that through sharing in Christ’s suffering, we are being changed into His likeness. As this process progresses, His glory shines through us more and more! We may have difficulty seeing it ourselves, but the world of darkness has no trouble seeing it!

4. Inward Renewal and Eternal Glory

“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.” (2 Co 4:16-18 NIV, emphasis added.)

Here Paul tells us that even though our human bodies are wasting away, we are experiencing the renewing of our minds. “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.” (Rom 12:2 NIV) Thus, as we allow His Spirit and His word to renew our minds through our troubles and suffering, we are being inwardly renewed and entering into His eternal glory.

5. Sin Loses its Grip on Us

“Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because *he who has suffered in his body is done with sin.* As a result, he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God.” (1 Pe 4:1,2 NIV, emphasis added.) I don’t believe Peter is teaching sinless perfection here. What he is teaching is that physical suffering lessens the power that sin has over us.

6. The Life of Jesus is Revealed in Us

“We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that *the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.* For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body.” (2 Co 4:10,11 NIV, emphasis added.) Have you ever noticed that Christians who have suffered a long time are usually very godly people? Some believers I’ve known who have endured long term suffering seem to live in the presence of Jesus. If we permit it, He abides with us through our suffering.

7. We May be Overjoyed

Peter adds his wisdom to this subject.

“Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that *you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.*” (1 Pe 4:12,13 NIV, emphasis added.)

I believe these verses refer primarily to that day when we see Jesus face to face. But it also applies when we see Him glorified in our lifetime through some event or testimony. We can experience that joy of the Lord in the present.

8. Our Suffering Produces Perseverance, Character and Hope

The apostle Paul suffered mightily in his many years of apostolic ministry. Note what he says in his letter to the Roman church concerning suffering.

“Not only so, but we also rejoice in our suffering, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us. (Rom 5:3-5 NIV)

Here is how James began his epistle.

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” (Jas 1:2-4 NIV)

These verses are so encouraging. There is no doubt in my mind that suffering is one of the best ways to produce perseverance which certainly does produce character. Don’t all of us want our children to persevere when things are hard, knowing that they will have stronger character at the end of it? But Paul doesn’t leave us with just a stronger character. He also reminds us that this process leads us into a stronger hope, not by our own will, but by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, who is the one who imparts hope within us! Finally, to be honest, I haven’t yet arrived at the point where I rejoice in my suffering as Paul does, but, like Paul, I press on!

Our Suffering Allows Us to Extend Christ's Comfort to Others

Suffering can not only be of personal benefit to each of us but it can be an extremely valuable tool through which we can extend Christ's comfort to others who are suffering. Paul wrote in his second letter to the Corinthian church.

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, *so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.* If we are distressed, *it is for your comfort* and salvation; if we are comforted, *it is for your comfort*, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort." (2 Cor 1:3-7 NIV, emphasis added.)

To me this passage reveals a remarkable principle. Paul is saying that God comforts us when we share in the sufferings of Christ so that *we may become dispensers of that comfort to others who are suffering.* I recall once when I was suffering horribly. Many came to comfort me. But when a brother who had suffered the same pain I was going through came bringing his comfort, truly the comfort of Christ overflowed through him to me. It was as though Jesus Himself was comforting me. I will never forget that experience, it was so healing for me.

Resurrection Power

Finally, our suffering flows into more and more resurrection power in our lives! Note that the Apostle Paul couples them together in his letter to the Philippians.

"I want to know Christ and the *power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his suffering*, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead." (Phil 3:10,11 NIV, emphasis added.)

I am convinced that all of us would just love more of that resurrection power, wouldn't we? But are we willing to undergo the necessary transformation through suffering as one of the principle ways to get that power? And by resurrection power, I mean power in the heavenlies. Remember Daniel? Once when he was praying an angel appeared to him and said,

"While I was speaking and praying, confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel and making my request to the LORD my God for his holy hill--while I was still in prayer, Gabriel, the man I had seen in the earlier vision, came to me in swift flight about the time of the evening sacrifice. He instructed me and said to me, 'Daniel, I have now come to give you insight and understanding. *As soon as you began to pray, an answer was given, which I have come to tell you, for you are highly esteemed.*'" (Dan 9:20-23 NIV, emphasis added.)

Now that is power in the heavenlies! Notice that Daniel said that he was making his requests to the Lord for "His holy

hill." What did he mean? In the Old Testament, hill was commonly understood as a place of power. When an army occupied the high ground, it had the advantage in battle. The phrase, "holy hill" was commonly understood as having power with God. Psalm 24 couples the Lord's hill and a holy place together.

Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false. He will receive blessing from the LORD and vindication from God his Savior. (Psa 24:3-5 NIV)

David lays out here the necessary requirements for anyone to "ascend the hill of the Lord," and to "stand in his holy place." In other words, to have power in the heavenlies as we pray and do the Lord's work through our ministries. That power comes to anyone who has clean hands and a pure heart. In Old Testament times, "clean hands" was a way of saying the person was blameless in his or her behavior. If someone went before a judge, he always wanted to prove that his behavior was without fault in the dispute, in other words, that he had clean hands.

Of course, we all have a pretty good idea of what a pure heart is, don't we? That's when our motives are pure, we want the best outcome, and most of all, we want God's will in every situation. Then anyone who wants access to that resurrection power must also be free from idols in his soul. He or she must be free of any binding hold that the things of the world may have on us. Finally, that person must be a truth teller, not a liar.

I think all of us would agree with Paul that one of the best ways, and possibly the very best way to achieve this Psalm 24 power with God, is through suffering. (Remember, that suffering can be physical, emotional, relational, financial, or whatever.)

Paul elaborates on that resurrection power in his letter to the Ephesians.

I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and *his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms*, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way. (Eph 1:18-23 NIV, emphasis added.)

Remember that we are co-heirs with Christ. In fact, God has even "... raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus." (Eph 2:6 NIV) I don't know about you but I truly covet that kind of spiritual power. How good of our loving Father to redeem our suffering in such a wonderful way!

Conclusion

The message contained in this teaching is not for the young in Christ. The Apostle John tells us that there are three stages of Christian growth: little children, young men and fathers. (See 1 John 2:12-14.) Many Christians who have been serving the Lord for many years have entered into the father/motherhood stage of life. I believe that they have come to understand the value of sharing in the sufferings of Christ as well as experiencing the resurrection power of standing in our Lord's holy place, atop His holy hill. What a glorious privilege!

Lord, so few of our churches today teach about the sufferings of Christ. I ask that You take the truths contained in this teaching and cause them to come alive in all of us as Your children. Open our understanding of this whole area of life so our sufferings are not in vain. Above all, help all of us to learn to cooperate with Your Holy Spirit as we allow sufferings to overflow with Your comfort to others. And, Lord, teach us how to bear this suffering You have allowed so that we also may share in more of Your resurrection power. Blessed be the name of Jesus! Amen!

[We have additional teaching on suffering and healing entitled, *A Biblical View of Suffering*, and *A Biblical View of Healing*. They may be downloaded and printed from our website at www.hundredfold.org.]

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