



Suffering for the Sake of Christ

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

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I think, that when it comes to suffering, we are some of the people who suffer the least of all the people in this world. We live in Canada which is one of the best places in the world to live. We live in a prosperous country and so we have jobs and money and more than enough of the things that we need. When compared with the rest of the world even the poorest people in our society are well off as far as material things are concerned. And we have very good health care so that diseases that in some parts of the world will probably lead to death don't even happen here because of vaccinations and generally speaking our good health-care helps us to avoid many sicknesses and cures us from many of the sicknesses that we do get, with God's blessing of course. We are living in a relatively peaceful society. Law and order work quite well. And so, for the most part our lives are tranquil and comfortable and secure.

On top of that we are Christians. That does not mean that we are any better than others, but it does mean that we are blessed above many others even as far as life in this world is concerned. Living as Christians spares us from many of the miseries that afflict the lives of many non-Christians. Sin leads to all kinds of miseries and while we still sin, our sin is restrained by grace and so we richly experience blessings in life as a result of God's grace enabling us to keep his law to some extent. And so, for the most part we are spared addictions, we have a good work ethic, most of us have good marriages and happy family lives and we experience a great deal of this-worldly happiness and contentment and wellbeing. Again, I'm not saying that we are perfect. We still sin and there is trouble in our lives because of sin, but generally speaking we reap many this-worldly benefits as a result of God's grace in our lives as well as hope for the life to come.

I begin with this because I'm going to be speaking about the role of suffering in the Christian life and I want to make sure that we are clear about the context in which we think about this subject. The biblical teaching about suffering is relevant to us in a number of different ways, but we must acknowledge as we begin that we are less trained in the school of suffering than most other Christians in history and most other Christians in the world today. And no doubt we are weaker than those who have experienced more suffering because God uses suffering and hardship in general to train his people to grow in graces like endurance and rejoicing in God during hard times.

And just to be clear, I'm not suggesting that we do not suffer at all. That is impossible in this sinful world. We experience accidents and sicknesses that medicine cannot cure. Some of us experience pain that will not go away and loved ones who have strayed or who have never known the gospel and are not interested in learning. All of us have lost loved ones at some point or we will. And we are not free from suffering in our relationships either, so because of the sin that remains we know strained and even broken relationships. So, we do suffer, but when compared with most people in the world most of us suffer significantly less.

So that describes, more or less, where we are in experience of suffering. We are thinking about suffering today because it is the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. And so, we want to think about suffering from a biblical perspective. We want to look at both their suffering and our suffering from a biblical perspective.

We will do that by hearing God's word from 2 Corinthians 12:1-10, focusing especially on verse 10, which is the theme text that was chosen by whoever sets up and organizes the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. This is what that verse says: The apostle Paul is writing, and he says, "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities."

Now the context here is Paul defending his apostleship. He was under criticism from a number of skillful and eloquent false teachers at Corinth. Paul is defending himself because the wellbeing of the Corinthians depended on them sticking with his message (which was the

true gospel) and not turning to the glitzy teachers with their false gospel. So, in chapter 11 he had been outlining his credentials as an apostle, but that whole matter of highlighting his credentials as an apostle, while necessary in that situation, made him uncomfortable and so he says in 11:30, "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness." And that leads to the first half of chapter 12 in which he tells how God humbled him by giving him what he calls a thorn in the flesh. He mentions that he had had a number of visions and revelations from Christ himself and in order to keep him from becoming conceited he says, "A thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited." We have no idea what it was, but whatever it was it was difficult to bear. Paul pleaded with the Lord three times that he would be relieved of that condition, whatever it was, but God said "no", as he often does with these kinds of requests. Instead of removing his affliction, God said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." That is what God says to his people when he denies requests for the removal of some affliction.

And Paul submitted to that. And this is how he expresses that submission: "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest in me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weakness, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Now it is interesting to consider the kinds of things that Paul mentions in connection with his weakness. "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities." In the light of that list, it is likely that the thorn in his flesh was persecution or perhaps a condition that made it difficult for him to pursue his ministry of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles.

This is something that we must understand about the biblical teaching about suffering. Especially in the New Testament, most of the time when the Bible talks about suffering it is suffering that happens because of persecution or suffering that happens as a direct result of serving Christ to promote the gospel. The Bible does deal with things like sickness and other forms of suffering that just come to us in God's

providence, but not nearly as often as it deals with suffering for the cause of Christ especially in the New Testament. In the Old Testament we have the book of Job and in the book of Psalms we have a few Psalms where the Psalmist is struggling with sickness but even in the Psalms most of the talk of suffering happens in the context of enemy attacks against the godly.

That is not to say that the Bible offers little or nothing to help us and guide us in the general suffering of life. There are all kinds of truths that are relevant such as the providence of God and the love of God for his people and the promise that God works all things together for the good of his people. The Bible has a great deal to teach us about how to deal with general suffering and there is a great deal of comfort and insight that it gives, but most of that is by applying relevant truths to our situation and there is not that much that addresses our general suffering directly. Most of the time when the New Testament addresses suffering directly it is talking about persecution or about the hardships that are experienced in seeking the advance of the gospel.

And that is what we see here in this text as well. It is clear that whatever the thorn in the flesh was it was something that was related to Paul's work as a missionary. Let me quote verse 10 again, "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities."

Now what are we to make of that? Well the Bible does not address that question directly, so I don't have an authoritative answer to that question. It is certainly not the case that God does not care about us when we suffer in a way that has nothing to do with persecution or the spread of the gospel. We see Jesus' compassion for the sick and burdened in the gospels. We see God's compassion in the instructions to believers to show compassion to the sick and the poor and the weak. God reveals himself to us as our Father and there is an ocean of comfort in that truth when we are suffering for whatever reason. 1 Peter 5:4 tells us to cast "all [our anxieties on him, because he cares for [us]]. But while we may rightly apply that verse to our general suffering, the context in which it comes is also persecution.

All we can say for sure is that God has a whole lot more to say in the New Testament about suffering due to persecution or the spread of the gospel than he does about suffering that is unrelated to persecution or the spread of the gospel. And that means that the suffering that was directly related to the confession of Christ and the spread of the gospel was the more urgent matter to be addressed in the minds of the biblical writers and thus also in the mind of the divine author who inspired them and directed every word that they wrote.

The reality is that suffering for the cause of the gospel was a very common experience in the New Testament church. And it was a matter of greater pastoral urgency than suffering that was unrelated to the cause of the gospel. I want to stress that that does not mean that God is unconcerned about suffering that is unrelated to the gospel witness. The Bible assures us that God cares about all our struggles. But we cannot deny that the authors of the New Testament are more concerned to address suffering that is related to persecution and the spread of the gospel than they are to address things like sickness and other general forms of hardship that come to us in the providence of God.

There seems to be two main reasons for this emphasis. One is that being willing to suffer for the cause of Christ is at the heart of the call to follow Jesus. Jesus himself is the pattern that we are called to follow and one of the keys of his life was suffering – indeed the foundation of our salvation is his crucifixion which was the most significant act of persecution ever perpetrated. And the call to follow Christ is a call to follow him in his suffering in the pursuit of the salvation of sinners. In Matthew 10, which is all about persecution, Jesus says, “And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

The call of the gospel is a call to embrace a life of suffering due to persecution. It is assumed that all followers of Christ will be persecuted to some extent and being willing to experience that suffering is an essential part of the response to the gospel as it is presented in the New Testament. That is explicit and unmistakable in Jesus’ call to follow him.

“[W]henever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” To follow Jesus is to follow a Saviour and a Lord who was a magnet for persecution and the assumption is that his followers will be as well.

Now thankfully that does not mean that all followers of Jesus will be persecuted in the same way and to the same extent. One of Jesus’ key sayings about persecution speaks of insults rather than physical harm. Matthew 5:11 “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.” So being reviled counts as persecution. It is persecution, according to Jesus, when people “utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on his account.” It is in the nature of things that the people of the world will hate and despise the followers of Jesus. Jesus himself said in John 15:19, “If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.”

So that is one reason for the New Testament emphasis on suffering for the sake of the gospel. It belongs to the call of the gospel to identify with the one who is hated by the world and all who do so will at least share in being hated by the world and they face the real possibility of anything from insults to martyrdom. This belongs to the Christian life.

A second reason for the New Testament emphasis on suffering for the sake of the gospel is that most of the books of the New Testament were written to people who were suffering for the sake of the gospel. This was a painful reality in the lives of the original recipients of these letters and so it was often addressed.

Now there is nothing that says that persecution will always be as intense in the lives of God’s people. Both the Bible and history of Christianity show that the intensity of persecution has been very different in different places and in different time periods. There is nothing that says that persecution will always be the same and if we are being faithful about confessing Christ before men, we do not have to feel guilty about not suffering the worst forms of persecution.

But the question of being public about our confession of Christ is an important one – it is a question that the Bible also places before us. If

we are not being persecuted because we are anonymous – that is, if we are not upfront and public about the fact that we are followers of Jesus – we are not truly followers of Jesus because confessing Christ before men is an integral part of what it means to follow Jesus. Jesus says in Matthew 10:32 “So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.”

So, this is the situation in the light of which I will apply this text. Most of us in the west do not experience a lot of suffering for the cause of the gospel. I’m sure there are some who do suffer because of their confession of Christ in the workplace or in school and in other situations. There are some who are insulted and slandered by people from the world because of their allegiance to Christ. But for most of us the extent of our persecution is just the general hatred that the world has for all Christians. We hesitate to call it suffering or persecution because it is not that difficult to bear, but it does fall under Jesus’ definition of persecution when he says that his disciples are blessed when people speak evil of you or insult you.

The suffering that is more of a factor in our lives and thinking are the kinds of suffering that are unrelated to our Christian witness – the kind of suffering that is common to all people whether they are believers or not. That suffering is real and God cares about it and it is spiritually significant, but it is in a different category than the suffering that is directly due to persecution or being involved in the spread of the gospel.

And we live in a world in which there are a huge number of our brothers and sisters who are all along the spectrum of suffering for the cause of the gospel from insults, to physical injuries, to psychological abuse, to rejection by family members, to destruction of property, to loss of employment, to imprisonment, to martyrdom, to being the sorrowing loved ones who are left behind.

So, let’s look at our text in the light of the context of our lives as we fit into the big picture of the global church. Paul says, “For the same of

Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Today is the International Day of Prayer for the persecuted church. This verse can guide us in our prayers for our persecuted brothers and sisters. We can pray that they will know that contentment that Paul is talking about. This is quite a remarkable statement! It’s one thing to quickly read this statement. It is another thing to really hear what Paul is saying. “For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

We can pray that that our brothers and sisters who at the moment are bearing the brunt of the persecution of the body of Christ will experience that contentment that Paul is speaking about in this text and that was a reality for him. Paul had learned this contentment by the grace of God. And we know that many of those who are bearing the brunt of persecution can and do make similar statements. That is surprising because it is amazing that anyone can actually be content while they are suffering so, but on the other hand it is not surprising because the same God who enabled Paul to be content in his sufferings for the cause of Christ is still the same God for his people. The God of Paul and Paul’s gospel has not changed. The principles of the gospel and its fruit have not changed and so we should expect that we will hear of similar expressions of contentment from persecuted Christians today – and we do.

But this is something that God enables them to do and so we can help them meaningfully with our prayers. One of the main messages that comes to us from those who are bearing the brunt of persecution in our time is the request that we pray for them. That is meaningful and significant support because our God is a God who hears and answers the prayers of his people. We can speak to God about their suffering and ask him to give them this amazing contentment that Paul is speaking about here and God who is near to them as he is near to us can and does give them that supernatural power to remain faithful and even to be content in their situation.

We can also pray that they will be able to echo Paul's statement, "For when I am weak, then I am strong." In verse 9 he says, "But he [the Lord] 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 of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me." Our brothers and sisters who are being persecuted are weak in many ways. They do not have power. They are a hated minority. Their focus as Christians is not on guns and self-defense, but on love and on peace and on trusting in God. None of that is too impressive as far as worldly thinking about strength and power is concerned. But Paul is saying that Jesus provides power for weak people who trust in him. Strength is faithfulness to God in the face of opposition. Strength is loving your enemies. Strength is accepting the persecution as something you sign up for when you become a Christian. This strength comes from Jesus through his Spirit and it gives it to those who are weak in themselves.

And the effect of all this is humility. Paul says that God gave him a thorn in the flesh in order to keep him from being conceited. Whatever the thorn in the flesh was, it was humbling. It made it clear that he had no strength in himself. And he was only able to persevere due to the power of God working in him and through him. We can pray that our fellow believers who are being persecuted may experience the spiritual blessings that Paul here connects with his weakness and God's power that was made perfect in his weaknesses.

And for ourselves. We must seek to be faithful in our gospel witness. We must deny ourselves in following Christ so that we not only are willing to endure whatever insults and hatred that we attract because of our public confession of Christ, but also that we are making sacrifices for the spread of the gospel. We have different callings here depending on our gifts and life-situations, but we are all called to live lives of sacrifice for the cause of the gospel and while that may not be suffering, we are called to make sacrifices and in the nature of the case sacrifice is painful. Time and money are the chief ways that we are called to sacrifice in the cause of the gospel.

The principles of this text are also relevant for the suffering in our lives or even the difficulties that are not directly related to the confession of

Christ and the spread of the gospel. This is not the focus of this passage, but there are principles here that we may apply to suffering in general. We are to be content in the struggles of life. We are to trust in God's strength in our weakness. Certainly, what God said to Paul, he says to all of his people in every situation. "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Life can be hard. Difficult things come our way. They may not be persecution, but they are still difficult and how we deal with them is significant for our walk with the Lord and the Lord does provide power for his people in their weakness even if that struggle is not directly related to the cause of the gospel.

By echoing Paul's thoughts in this passage, we are reflecting the biblical truth that what matters most in life is not our health, and not how comfortable our lives are, but our relationship with Jesus Christ. Paul was able to be content in his sufferings "for the sake of Christ." That is our calling whether our suffering is persecution or directly related to promoting the gospel or whether it is unrelated to these things. If we are living for the sake of Christ, then we can be content in our sufferings because then our relationship with Christ is the heart of our joy and there is nothing that can take that away.

I'm not suggesting that this is easy. Suffering is hard. It is hard for our persecuted brothers and sisters and it is hard for us when we are called to suffer. Being content in suffering is not easy or automatic for them and it is not easy or automatic for us. But Paul's example shows us what is possible by the grace of God. And that should be our prayer for the persecuted church as well as for ourselves.