

# Sermon 30, The Glory of Suffering: A Sermon Against Suicide, Ephesians 3:13

**Proposition:** Because you are loved, don't lose heart!

- I. The Temptation to Lose Heart
- II. The Reasons to Not Lose Heart
  - A. The Greatness of the Benefits Conveyed Through Gospel Ministry
  - B. The Glory of Receiving Christ's Love through Gospel Ministry

## **Introduction**

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, Paul is winding up his long parenthetical account of how he came to be imprisoned — which was through the ministry God had given him — and how that ministry was one of the ways in which God is working out His plan to show His wisdom to the world. He comes back, in our text this morning, to earth. It's as though he looked up and saw the Roman soldier he was chained to snoring next to him, and realized afresh the reality that he had been in prison for five straight years. Yet though he returns to earth, comes back to the realization that he is genuinely sitting in a Roman house under arrest, his attitude does not falter. It is clear that his attitude is not one of gloom, but of triumph. The biggest concern he has about his imprisonment is that it will discourage the Ephesians. And so, rather than moaning and complaining about his lot in life, he takes just a moment here to seek to encourage the Ephesian believers. He wants them not to be discouraged, but to be hearty and exuberant in Christ's love like he is. What I want you to see in our text this morning is that because you are loved, you should never lose heart.

### **I. The Temptation to Lose Heart**

What does it mean to lose heart? We use this phrase, and cognates like “disheartened” frequently. It means, simply, to lack desire. To not have the heart to do something is to be without the internal motivation necessary to accomplish it. Sometimes this is good, of course — as when someone says “I was going to steal from that poor family, but I just didn't have the heart to do it.” But usually it is bad, as when we say “I know I need to get up and exercise regularly, but I just don't have the heart for it.” The word used here in Greek means literally to act badly, or to become weary and discouraged. The colloquial English “lose heart” is a good equivalent, as is “be discouraged” in NIV and “faint” in KJV.

Well, what tempts you to discouragement? Where in your life do you consistently feel that you lack the heart to do what you need to do? Evidently, this temptation was very real to the Ephesians. Paul believed that they might lose heart, and so he warns them not to do so.

Now, there is a general discouragement and a particular discouragement. This verse deals with the particular discouragement that the Ephesians might have felt over Paul's sufferings.

They realized that because he had been seen in Jerusalem with Trophimus the Ephesian, he had ended up spending five years in prison to this point. And, they might have been getting discouraged by that.

Now, I don't think anyone here is likely to get too discouraged over the fact that the apostle Paul was imprisoned for five years. That particular temptation is long gone from us. So what do we do with this verse? Do we simply move on to more relevant parts of Ephesians? I don't think we have to do that. This verse is still relevant to us today, when we understand Paul's request more broadly. Obviously, we shouldn't be discouraged about his sufferings. But we shouldn't be discouraged about other events in our lives either.

So, it seems to me, we ought to extend Paul's warning against discouragement. It seems to me that at the very least, a warning not to be discouraged over Paul's sufferings also implies a warning not to be discouraged over the sufferings of other people on your behalf.

Let's say that your father works long hours and is visibly exhausted at the end of the day. Let's say that he is so out of it that you have a hard time talking to him, especially in the evening, because he basically sleeps in his chair until bedtime. Now, he's working so hard for you. He's doing it because he loves you and wants you to have what you need. Don't be discouraged over his sufferings on your behalf! Don't say, "I am not worth this kind of sacrifice. I think my dad is pushing himself too hard. I wish he wouldn't knock himself out so much for me!"

Paul says, "Don't you let yourself think that. Don't be discouraged when people suffer for you!" We could extend this even further. Don't be discouraged at any time when showing Christ's love to you proves to be painful for the one showing the love. Don't ever believe the lie that because love is difficult, it must be wrong! We can easily imagine a woman who is horribly disfigured in a tragic accident and who begins to obsess about her appearance. She might say to her husband, "I'm so ugly. How can you bear to be around me?" She is discouraged. And why is she discouraged? Because she believes that to love her will entail suffering. She has swallowed this lie that if love is brutally hard, if it produces suffering in the lover's life, then something is wrong. "It shouldn't be this painful!" she might say. "It has got to be hard to live with an ugly hag like me, and therefore I'm going to divorce you so that you can spend your life with somebody beautiful."

Does that make sense? Of course not. But that is how the Ephesians were thinking. They were thinking that something was not right in Paul's ministry. They were thinking that they had done something wrong, because his love for them had cost him so much. And so Paul says to them, "No! Don't think that way! Do not lose heart at my tribulations for you."

We can easily lose heart at others' tribulations for us. We can decide that our college education is costing too much, and drop out of school to spare our parents from needing to pay that bill. We can decide that our medical bills are too expensive, and silently attempt suicide to spare our families further costs. We can decide that we are too pricey, too sick, too ugly, too difficult, too pathetic, too negative, too anything — and then become discouraged. The fault was

not in Paul's love for the Ephesians; it was in their willingness to accept his suffering on their behalf.

Brothers and sisters, the Ephesians are not the only ones who have a hard time accepting someone else's suffering on their behalf. Fundamentally, their difficulty was the one we have noted and talked about before — that it's easier to change an adult diaper than to have your adult diaper changed! It is easier to give than to receive. Paul was giving them his love from that Roman prison cell, and he realized that it was an intense gift. It was a gift so intense that they might have a hard time receiving it. And so he urged them not to lose heart.

Let me apply all this to the most radical case. If you are considering suicide today, you are like the Ephesians. You are in danger of losing heart because you are fearful of receiving the powerful love that desires the good of life for you. At some level, you think that your existence causes more suffering than it's worth. You may be losing heart over your own suffering; you may be losing heart over someone else's suffering. But if you are losing heart, then please listen to the rest of this sermon. You see, Paul mentions the reasons not to lose heart. Why is life more valuable than the alternative? Why should we be encouraged, "enheartened," to live life to the fullest?

## **II. The Reasons to Not Lose Heart**

Paul mentions two grand reasons in this verse.

### **A. The Greatness of the Benefits Conveyed Through Gospel Ministry**

The first reason not to lose heart is because of the greatness of the benefits that are conveyed to you through the ministry of the gospel. That is all packed into the first word of v. 13, "therefore." Wherefore? Because Paul is a minister of the gospel, the good news that God is creating a multiethnic body of believers, according to His eternal plan, in which to display His wisdom to a watching world of angelic powers. Through that ministry, we have freedom of speech before God and freedom of access into His presence. Those are two major benefits. Those are two grand privileges that come to us through Paul's ministry of the gospel!

So, Paul says, don't lose heart. You have the freedom to meet with God Himself. Don't be discouraged by the sufferings of others, and especially by the sufferings of those who have shared the gospel with you. Their proclamation of the good news has given you the great benefits described in chs. 1-3 of this book. You have every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus! Do you recognize how glorious those benefits are? Do you delight in them? Do you want them?

There's no need to kill yourself. There's no need to deliberately cut off people whose love for you is making their lives harder. You shouldn't lose heart over that, because you have every spiritual blessing. People may be hurting because they love you, but you should not therefore try to get them to stop loving you. Instead, you should learn to rejoice that they love you so much — and doubly and trebly to rejoice if it is through their love that you have come to experience the ultimate spiritual blessings that are found in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

## **B. The Glory of Receiving Christ's Love through Gospel Ministry**

But Paul doesn't stop there. Not only did his ministry, his ministry of suffering, bring the Ephesians every spiritual blessing. His ministry of suffering was also their glory.

Now, what does that mean? That they were supposed to go around Ephesus and say, "One of the greatest men in history is suffering on my account"? Not exactly. Indeed, it is true that no matter who you ask, most of the credit for institutional Christianity goes to the Apostle to the Gentiles. But even greater than the reality that such a great man was willing to suffer for them was the reality that Paul's suffering on their behalf was his way of expressing Jesus' love to them. It was their glory to be loved by Jesus Christ, and that love was manifested by His apostle's willingness to suffer in order to convey it. How do you know how much Jesus loves you? Look at how much His apostle loved you. Look at how much Paul suffered in order to get out the truths he so forcefully proclaimed!

Think of it this way. If you want to know how much your mother loves you, then carry a baby for 9 months, give birth to it, and then take care of that child every single day for 18 years. That's how much your mother loves you.

How much does Jesus love you? Well, look at how much his servants love you. That is the message of this verse. Do you think that no one cares? Then look at how much Paul cared. Paul cared enough to gladly spend five straight years in prison for no reason at all other than that he had shared Jesus with the Gentiles. Paul cared enough that he was able to tell the Ephesians to glory in his love for them, his love that led him to suffer joyfully.

What would your mother say if you said to her, "Mom, I just gave birth last week. That was the most painful experience of my life. In fact, it hurt badly enough that I really felt sorry for you and wished that I had never been born and caused you so much pain."

Would your mother be really touched and say, "Oh, how sweet, daughter!?" Of course not! She would be absolutely livid that you devalued her sufferings in that way. The proper response to someone suffering for you out of love is not to say, "I wish I weren't here so that you wouldn't have to suffer." The proper response to someone suffering for you out of love is to glory in it! You aren't thrilled that your mother felt so much pain she thought she was going to die as she gave birth to you — but you are thrilled that she loved you enough to do it, and to do it gladly. That's the message of this verse. Paul loved the Ephesians enough to suffer for them, and to do it gladly. That was their glory — to be loved that much by an apostle as a sign to them that Jesus loved them even more.

Brothers and sisters, I am terrified to even bring this up. But an obvious application of this is to pastors. Your pastor should love you so much that you can glory in his sufferings for you, as you glory in your mother's sufferings for you. It is my call to love you so completely that when I suffer for knowing you, you can say, "That is one of the best things in my life — my pastor loves me this much!"

If I did love you all that much, hopefully it would free you from discouragement. Pray for me, and for every pastor you know, that we would love our congregations so much that it would

be clear to everyone that the depth of love we have for our people is their glory. Our sufferings ought to be merely a sign of how much you are loved by Jesus Christ.

So why should you not kill yourself, despite the suffering that your life brings to yourself and others? Because other people suffering for your sake is your glory. It is a sign of the love that Jesus Christ has for you, and more especially so when it is people suffering for telling you the gospel. Do not be discouraged, brothers and sisters. Suffering is a sign of Christ's love. So don't lose heart. He loves you. That's why Paul suffered in writing this letter. That's why you are hearing the good news today.

Ultimately, of course, the greatest suffering that ever took place for your sake was the suffering of Jesus Christ on the cross. He suffered in your place because of His great love for you. Don't be discouraged; His suffering in your place is your glory. The Son of God loved you and gave Himself for you. That reality is your fundamental identity. It's reflected in every case of suffering on your behalf, from the pain your mother went through to give you birth all the way down to the tiniest case of someone holding their tongue when tempted to say a hurtful word to you. Christ loves you, and He suffered for you. And so every time someone willingly suffers for you, it is a reminder not to commit suicide, a reminder to accept His love, a reminder that life is worth it because He died to buy it. Can you rejoice in the love of Christ? Only this gospel can free you from discouragement. So embrace the good news. Walk in it. Glory in the fact that Jesus died for you, that His apostle loves you, that His ministers seek to convey that same love in how they minister to you. You are surrounded by Jesus' love, and it is your glory. Amen.