

STUDY 14

Participants in Christ's Sufferings

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INTRODUCTION

It is self evident that Christians suffer along with others in the world. When floods and fire come, Christian homes are inundated or incinerated along with the others. Illness, bereavement and the deep pain and suffering associated with life in the creation under the current conditions of its 'groaning' all come near to us. Christians are afflicted with deadly diseases, and in financial crises Christians lose their jobs along with the rest. As ordinary men and women, we share in the sufferings that come to ordinary men and women. What should be different is our understanding of these forms of suffering. We are not afflicted by 'fate' or 'bad luck', but all things come to us under the hand of the loving Father. We, as his children, are not to live in the general sufferings of life as though we (and God) have to make the best of a bad lot. We receive all things from him, even if other men and women have meant them for evil. We receive them in faith, entrusting ourselves to the faithful Creator whose plan for the whole creation is being worked out in and through the travail of these present days.

We also know that Christians do sometimes suffer as law-breakers in the world. While Peter tells us that we should not live in such a way that we should suffer just punishment for criminal or anti-social behaviour (1 Pet. 4:15) it is an obvious fact that Christians have transgressed (and do transgress) the law of the land and suffer for it.¹ This, too, is not the suffering of which we need to speak in this paper. What is in view here is the suffering that comes to us by virtue of bearing the name of Christ. We may speak of this in two ways: the suffering that comes externally (i.e. from the world to us) and the suffering that is internal (i.e. the existential anguish that we experience in our battle with the world, the flesh and the devil; as also the eschatological groaning that accompanies every step of our life in Christ). Commenting on Philippians 3:10, Geoffrey Bingham says:

No one can be united to Christ by faith (baptism), and share with him in his life and not suffer . . . It is suffering *for* Christ, *because* of Christ, *with* Christ. Principally you can only know in sharing, and to *know* Christ is just to do this. It is not the *price* of knowing him but the *way* of knowing him.²

¹ At this point we will not ask for a show of hands regarding traffic infringement notices, demerit points and the like!

² G. C. Bingham, *Philippians: A Commentary* (NCPI, Blackwood, n.d.) p. 39, his italics.

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Suffering and baptism into Christ belong together. We suffer because of who we are in the Son.

THE WORLD HATES THE FATHER

No Longer of the World

Christ promised that his flock would suffer because they bear his name (e.g. Matt. 10:22). As the context of this verse makes plain, this hatred would involve the betrayal and denial of friends and family, the handing over of his flock to courts and other expressions of human authority. In this way the flock in the world is as 'sheep among wolves' (Matt. 10:16, ESV). While this hatred comes with all the vindictiveness of the world system (the 'world' here being understood in its theological meaning), it is in fact not to be received as such by the believers themselves. Indeed, the hatred of the world is the occasion for them experiencing the blessing of God (Matt. 5:11; Luke 6:22). In the suffering itself we experience the power of Christ's resurrection, and in the fellowship of his sufferings we come to know him more deeply and to trust him more fully. The world, however, knows none of this.

Why should this hatred be there? The answer is not hard to find, though it is totally irrational. The reason for the world's hatred is that Christians no longer belong to the world (John 15:19; 17:14). While we have been in the possession of the prince of this world, we are his no longer (Col. 1:13; Eph. 2:1ff.). We *were* children of wrath, even as the rest, *but now* we are children of the Father, unlike the rest. Jesus said of his own 'flesh and blood' brothers that: 'The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil' (John 7:7),³ yet James and Jude (Matt. 13:55; cf. Jude 1) became leaders in the New Testament community of believers, with James being martyred for the sake of Jesus' name. In like manner Saul the Pharisee knew no sufferings, but Paul the apostle was constantly afflicted for the sake of Christ. Jesus says that the world hates his people because they do not belong to the world. Just as the world hates the light (John 3:19) it hates those who have come to *the* Light.

Two Different Families

When we press beyond the simple observation that the world hates those who no longer belong, we find that such hatred is not sociological or psychological, but spiritual. The hatred of Christ's people cannot be explained by peer group dynamics, socio-economic or political power imbalances, or even the paradox of toleration that is inherent in postmodernism! Rather the hatred of Christ and his people is the expression of two different spiritual families. The world hates Jesus because it hates his Father and does not know the One who sent him (John 15:21; 16:3). The rejection of the Son is the rejection of the Father (Matt. 10:40; Luke 10:16; John 13:20) and at the same time the rejection of the Spirit of the Father and the Son (John 14:17; cf. 1 Thess. 4:8). Conversely, to receive the Son is to receive the Father and to be saved (John 12:44; 5:24; cf. 3:18, 36). Those who do not receive the Son do not have the Father's words abiding within them (John 5:36-38). In John 8:42-44 (NASB) the Lord shows the real reason behind the world's hatred of him:

³ Unless otherwise stated, scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible.

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Jesus said to them, 'If God were your Father, you would love Me; for I proceeded forth and have come from God, for I have not even come on My own initiative, but He sent Me. Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot hear My word. You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.'

The same point is made in 1 John 3. There, the apostle says that we should not be surprised that the world hates us (v. 13), but the discussion surrounding this verse makes it clear that the world's hatred of the Father's children is simply because of who they are. The world belongs to the evil one. Believers are the *Father's* children, not the children of the devil. The roots of the hatred of the world (in all its varied socio-religious and political expressions) for Christians are found in the hatred of Satan for God.

Hated by a 'Devised' Father

Geoffrey Bingham has pointed out that Satan cannot have an 'ontological' kingdom, but only a 'devised' one.⁴ As such Satan devises a family; a system of prophetic action; a scheme of laws and justice; an abundance of worship; a future hope; and a means (or rather, many means!) for 'salvation' of some sort. He even promises love and fulfilment to his children, and a life of abundance! This devised system is carefully crafted and fuses the world, the flesh, the idols, and guilty sinners (particularly through their response to the law in the conscience and the subsequent fear of death) in a completely enmeshed arrangement. It is impossible to break free from this system (not that guilty sinners wish to do so!) and the only possibility of release is through a new exodus, by which God redeems his people from the power of (spiritual) Pharaoh's hand. But, Christ our Passover has indeed been sacrificed, and the true exodus to which the Old Testament event pointed has really been accomplished.

Through participation in Christ's death and resurrection, Christians no longer belong to this devised system, but share in the ontological nature of all things because they belong to the Father through their union with the Son. They are a threat to all that is devised, since they stand as a witness to One whom the prince of this world has hated from the beginning. Thus, the devised system must devise ways of dealing with them, according to a devised pattern of justice.

We should not be surprised by this. The world system must seek to devise its means of creating and maintaining peace, harmony, social cohesion and relational fulfilment. The means by which this is done will vary from culture to culture over time. However, evidence suggests that there is no culture where the gospel has taken root that has not persecuted the people of Christ as they have brought the message of the Father's love. Indeed, this is the way Christ has said it would be, and has been so from the very beginning, with Cain and Abel being the first example. In an ironical expression of this in postmodern western culture we have seen the rise of a whole new category of political policy and juridical action known as 'hate crimes'.⁵ From the

⁴ See, for example, his book, *The Clash of the Kingdoms* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1989), pp. 45–9.

⁵ A fairly straightforward socio-political analysis of how this has happened can be found in Valerie Jenness and Ryken Grattet, *Making Hate a Crime: From Social Movement to Law Enforcement* (Russell James Foundation, New York, 2004).

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socio-political point of view this is seen to be essential to prevent the fragmentation of a society which has no inherent unity. It is an attempt to prevent the slide of western nations into mere tribalism and chaos. In the paradox of tolerance that postmodernism must produce, the vilification/hate crime laws of western nations may well become one of the main means by which the Father's children are subject to various forms of persecution, as the gospel does not finally allow for the exclusivity of Christ to be compromised.

Hated without Cause

It is significant that Christ was persecuted by the world system of his day, simply because of who he was. His trials showed that he was in fact innocent of any charge brought against him, so the rejection is even more tightly focussed. He is hated without cause (John 15:25). Here we run into the irrationality of the situation of his sufferings, and of ours when we suffer for the sake of his name. There is no just cause for the hatred. Sin is lawlessness (1 John 3:4), and by its very nature (if we can speak of sin having a 'nature') it is beyond reason. We cannot find any rational cause for the world's hatred of us, any more than we can find any rational cause for our hatred of the Father when we were still in the world. While it is self-evident that we should not set out to cause offence (1 Pet. 2:12; Phil. 2:15f.; Titus 2:7f.) it is also clear that this will not prevent persecution for the sake of Christ. Indeed, it may simply provide another occasion for the latent hatred of God and love of iniquity to be made manifest (cf. 1 Pet. 4:4). The whole point of Peter's admonition is that Christians will suffer unjustly and that therefore, as with Christ, they must entrust their cause to God (1 Pet. 2:21–25; 3:13–22; 4:12–19). We should not be surprised that such sufferings come, because we are in Christ, and the world has hated him before it has hated us. Moreover, we (who *were* in the world) hated Christ once, but now we love him. So the subjection of the people of God to the various means by which the world may cause them to suffer is not the end of the story. As with Saul the apostle, today's persecutor may be tomorrow's evangelist!

THE SUFFERING OF UNION WITH CHRIST

In the above pages we have been treating the matter of the sufferings we experience because we bear the name of the Son. These are external elements, which come to us from the opposition of the world, for example. However, the external is matched by an existential, internal sharing in the sufferings of Christ. These, in turn, are linked with the eschatological hope that we share in the Spirit. There are a number of dimensions we could consider and the headings here are not exhaustive. The point is simply that we participate in the active love of God, and this cannot be without us participating in the suffering that love knows. It is the nature of love to bear suffering, but also in its nature to suffer for others.

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The Suffering of Love for the World . . .

While there is joy in heaven over every sinner who repents, there is no joy in heaven over every unrepentant sinner who dies. Judgement is indeed God's strange, or alien work (to use Luther's terms). Mercy lies close to his heart and is his proper work. So when we consider the sufferings of belonging to Christ, the greater part of them is not that *we* suffer (that would be entirely too selfish and potentially self-piteous), but that the Love who would come to release men from the grip of Satan is rejected. Jesus weeps over Jerusalem (Luke 13:34f.; cf. Luke 19:41f.; Matt. 23:37), not because of the physical pain he is about to undergo in the city's midst, but because of what the rejection of him would mean for these, God's beloved covenant people. Lamentations is the Old Testament expression of the pain of that love, as are so many of the prophetic oracles. Hosea 11 and like passages let us know that the love of God is far from stoic in its manner of expression. By virtue of the gift of the Spirit shed abroad in our hearts we, too, love the world and long with tears that men and women might be saved from the world (cf. Rom. 9:2-3). In large measure, then, we suffer with Christ in the love of sinners who will not receive forgiveness.

. . . and the Church

In passages such as 2 Corinthians 1:5 and 4:7-11, we read of the principle of Paul's suffering as a messenger of the gospel. Some of the details of this are given to us in places such as 2 Corinthians 11:16-33. When taken in the wider context of the Corinthian letters, Paul's recitation of the physical sufferings (a recitation to which Paul is reluctantly forced by the nature of the pastoral situation in Corinth) does not communicate the full extent or real nature of Paul's anguish. The real pain evident is in Paul's care for the wayward Corinthians (see, for example, 2 Cor. 11:1ff.; cf. 2:4; Gal. 4:19; Phil. 1:18; 2:17; Col. 2:1). He shares in the burden of the Church (cf. 2 Cor. 11:2ff.) that the people of God might come to maturity, and take up the full measure of their calling in the Lord. In this way he 'fills up' that which is lacking in the afflictions of Christ's body (Col. 1:24), as in Christ he takes the strain on behalf of other brethren who are not. To be united with the Lord Jesus is to be united to his people, and we cannot therefore share in the ministry of the Spirit without participating in the suffering of and for God's family. In Paul's speech on the beach at Miletus (Acts 20:17-38) we see something of the shared dimensions of this. He bore the suffering for the Ephesian church and particularly its eldership deeply. He knew what would come to them, and what trials they would have to face. In our own situation today, I suggest that much of our pain is for the Church, and much weeping and groaning takes place in our hearts not merely for the redemption of our bodies, but for the redemption of Christ's beloved body, of which he is the head.

The Suffering of the Spirit's Groaning

In Christ we are fully adopted into the Father's family. Theologically, the doctrine of adoption is the positive side of the doctrine of justification. It is not just that we are acquitted of our guilt, but positively we are fully accepted by the Father. We stand justified in the Son, as his sons. We have the Spirit in our hearts as a pledge of our

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future inheritance, and we wait with eager longing for the adoption process to be brought to its culmination. We have the first-fruits of the Spirit, and we groan within ourselves for the full redemption of our bodies (Rom. 8:23), but this is most fully because we groan for the redemption of the whole cosmos. The Spirit himself groans within us (Rom. 8:26f.) and we share with him in all that he bears in himself of the hope to come and grief of that hope delayed. Childbirth (and this is the imagery used throughout Romans 8) does not come without pain.

This imagery is not new, and doubtless Paul here picks up Old Testament themes evident in such passages as Isaiah 26:16–19 and 66:7–14. It is also seen in Jesus' words to the disciples before his death, anticipating his resurrection and the gift of the Spirit:

Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you (John 16:20–22, ESV).

Commenting on this passage, with particular reference to its Old Testament connections, C. K. Barrett says:

... the death and resurrection of Jesus were described in a language which is properly eschatological; that is, John treats them as types and anticipations of eschatological events. The resurrection means, in an anticipatory way, the realization of messianic salvation.⁶

We are not yet at the point where the new creation has been brought fully to birth, but the labour is well advanced! We live in anticipation of the general resurrection and the subsequent rebirth of the entire cosmos at the time of the *parousia*. With earnest expectation we cry out, 'Come, Lord Jesus. Come!' as we currently share in the suffering and groaning of the Spirit who is bringing the whole cosmos to its goal.

⁶ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, SPCK, London, 1978, p. 493.