

The Blessedness of Suffering

Philippians 1:27-30; Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

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Have you thanked the Lord today for all His gracious gifts freely bestowed upon you in Christ Jesus? Perhaps there is one gift for which you have forgotten to thank the Lord—the gift of suffering for Christ. Now do I hear you say, “Wait just a minute, Pastor, I thought I heard you call suffering a gracious gift from God.” Yes, you heard me correctly. Suffering for Christ’s sake is a gracious gift bestowed upon all those who trust alone in Jesus Christ alone for their eternal salvation. The Apostle Paul announces in our biblical text for this Lord’s Day that not only has God graciously granted to Christians the gift of faith to believe in the Lord Jesus, but He has also graciously given to them the gift of suffering as well.

Some may be tempted to think, “I’ll take the first gift—faith—but please give the second gift—suffering— to someone else who might need it. I’ll do just fine without it.” But dear ones, God declares that faith in Christ and suffering for Christ are inseparable gifts of the one package of salvation. You can’t have one without the other. Faith and suffering are not like different flavors of ice cream that you may pick between.

May the Lord teach us not to despise any gift given to us from God, and that especially goes for the gift of suffering, because it is so difficult for us to understand when we are in the midst of suffering, heartache, pain, sorrow, or fear, how it is such a blessing. It is faith in a God who cannot lie that upholds in that truth—certainly not sight. From our text in Philippians 1:27-30, I would have you note three truths given to Christians in the midst of their sufferings: (1) Stand as One in Suffering (Philippians 1:27); (2) Do Not Fear Your Adversaries (Philippians 1:28); and (3) Suffering for Christ Is a Gracious Gift (Philippians 1:29-30).

I. Stand as One in Suffering (Philippians 1:27).

A. The Apostle Paul is the human writer of this Letter to the Philippians, which was written during his first Roman imprisonment in about 63 or 64 A.D. As it happened in God’s providence, Paul was released by Emperor Nero soon after this letter was written, but imprisoned three or four years later and beheaded by godless Nero.

1. However, Paul was not fearful, nor bitter, nor feeling sorry for himself in this letter as we see in Philippians 1:20-24. Since his whole reason and purpose for living was Christ, no one could really rob him of his joy, even in the midst of his suffering for Christ. This is one of the chief goals which Paul communicates in this epistle: one can rejoice in the Lord even in the midst of suffering.

2. You are not doomed to misery because of your suffering. In fact, it is not optional—you and I are commanded to rejoice in the Lord always (Philippians 4:4). The main reason we don’t do so is because our eyes are glued to our pain, sorrow, and fears rather than glued to the victorious and resurrected Lord Jesus. We are walking by sight and not by faith. If you are suffering for Christ, you can learn to rejoice in the Lord in the midst of your suffering—you can learn peace and contentment even if the whole world around you is falling apart (Philippians 4:11-13). If God says you can do it and you say you can’t, who do you suppose is telling the truth and who is not?

B. It would appear that the Philippian Christians were undergoing some type of suffering themselves, and hence the reason for this letter: to encourage them to rejoice in the midst of their suffering for Christ (note the mention of “adversaries” in Philippians 1:28 and the mention of “the same conflict” in Philippians 1:30). We have noted in our series through Acts how Paul and Silas suffered in Philippi at the hands

of the city magistrates in being unjustly beaten to a bloody pulp with rods (without even a trial), how they were thrown into an unsanitary, dark, damp prison, and how they were placed in stocks so that they could not even move to a comfortable position. And yet what were they doing at midnight—they were singing praises (psalms) to the Lord—they were rejoicing. Paul is not commanding the Philippians to do something which he did not live out before them when the Church of Philippi was established (Acts 16). It would appear that persecution and suffering has now arisen in Philippi against the Church approximately 10-12 years later.

C. Paul says in Philippians 1:27, as citizens of Christ's kingdom, live in a way that is consistent with the gospel, which is the constitution of that heavenly kingdom. Sure you are persecuted by the Jews and Romans, but what did you really expect. After all, they're citizens of a different kingdom than we are, and they hate the citizens of Christ's kingdom. Don't be shocked by what you face—this is to be expected from a world that hates the Lord Jesus Christ. If they beat the Lord Jesus, spat upon Him, mocked him, beat a crown of thorns into His head, and crucified Him, why should we think we will be exempt from all persecution and suffering ("If we suffer, we shall also reign with him" 2 Timothy 2:12).

D. Paul then goes on to exhort the Philippians to "stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel" (Philippians 1:27).

1. Dear ones, in the midst of suffering for Christ, we must allow our afflictions to draw us closer to one another rather than to divide us (cf. Job's wife who told Job to curse God and die, Job 2:9). We who stand together in the truth of Christ must realize the sufferings of others for the Cause of Christ are not theirs alone, but are each of ours as well. We cannot stand aloof from one another when we undergo trials and tribulations, but must all the more pull together.

2. Trials will either unite us, or they will divide us (whether in a family, church or nation). Trials will reveal to us whether we are truly united together in an unbreakable bond held together by sacred principles from God's Word. What a blessed opportunity to come alongside the needy in our midst, when they are afflicted and tried, so as to bear their burdens by suffering with them (that's true sympathy).

E. I testify before the Lord of the encouragement I have received from so many of you when I have passed through trials for standing for the truth, trials of health and finances, and trials that have hit our church (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12). So we must come alongside one another in our sufferings, for they are not the sufferings of merely one member, but the sufferings of Christ in our union with Him ("Saul, Saul, what persecutest thou me?" in Acts 9:4). They are the sufferings of us all who are united to Christ. The first truth then is that we must stand together as one in the midst of suffering.

II. Do Not Fear Your Adversaries (Philippians 1:28).

A. Paul next exhorts the Philippians not to be terrified by those adversaries who are the means by which suffering may come. In this particular case, Paul refers to the Jews or to the Romans (who were often used as instruments of persecution against Christians). We need not fear our greatest enemies (whether the world, the flesh, or the devil), even when they cast us into prison, deprive us of our liberties, seek to silence our testimony for the truth, and for two reasons which are immediately stated.

1. Your suffering for Christ at the hands of adversaries is an evident token (demonstration, or proof) of their destruction or judgment to come (Philippians 1:28). For, dear ones, they are not merely persecuting a Christian for maintaining the truth of God, but rather they are persecuting the whole body of Christ, and even the Head of that body, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. It may not be a proof to them of their impending judgment, but it is a proof to you of their judgment, for they are persecuting Christ. The Lord will

not be mocked—whatsoever they sow, that will they also reap (unless Jesus shows them mercy in humbling them for their sin and granting to them faith in Christ as with Paul).

2. Your suffering for Christ is also a remarkable proof or evidence of your own salvation (Philippians 1:28). How is that? Because your suffering for Christ and His truth is a proof of your union with Christ and with the faithful martyrs and witnesses of Christ from the past (Matthew 10:24-26; Matthew 5:11-12). This is written for your encouragement. Will you receive it or not? When you suffer for Christ, you can turn that which is fearful into something that is encouraging. How can your adversaries overcome you with fear, when such truths assure you that the Lord will overcome them and will preserve you as His own?

B. Thus, the second truth of the Apostle Paul is, “Don’t fear your adversaries.”

III. Suffering for Christ Is a Gracious Gift (Philippians 1:29-30).

A. There are two graces that are said here to be given to us for Christ’s sake: faith and suffering.

1. Saving faith to embrace Jesus Christ as our only righteousness and salvation is not something we naturally possess (2 Thessalonians 3:2). It is the gift of God granted to us for Christ’s sake, not for our own sake (Philippians 1:29). There is nothing we can do to earn the gift of faith—it is sovereignly bestowed by God upon His elect whom He effectually calls unto Himself (Ephesians 2:8-9). Saving faith in Christ is knowing Christ through His Word, agreeing that what is taught about Christ in His Word is true, and trusting that Christ will accomplish all that He has promised to do for your salvation in His Word. Saving faith is unlike other graces flowing from your salvation, for saving faith is the only instrument by which you receive the salvation promised to you in Christ. You are not justified before God (declared righteous by God) by repentance or love, but by faith alone. Saving faith eyes the righteousness of Christ, and receives that perfect righteousness as your own, rather than looking to yourself for any qualification. From saving faith flows every other grace which God gives to His beloved children.

2. One of the graces that flows from saving faith in Christ is suffering for Christ (Philippians 1:29). For, dear ones, saving faith unites us to Jesus Christ, and suffering for Christ demonstrates that we have been united to Christ by faith alone.

a. In order for us to better understand what it means to suffer for Christ, let us first consider **what suffering for Christ is not**.

(1) **Suffering for Christ is not an evidence of one’s lack of faith.** Consider that the prophets and apostles all suffered for their faith in the one true living God. In fact, this verse teaches that suffering for Christ always accompanies saving faith.

(2) **Suffering for Christ is not a proof that the Lord doesn’t really love you.** To the contrary, suffering for Christ is a proof of your union with Christ (Philippians 1:28). Are we also to conclude that God the Father did not love His only begotten Son, because Christ also suffered while on earth? Of course not! In fact it was a covenant of love between the Father and Son made in eternity that brought Jesus into this world to suffer on behalf of sinners, in order that they might know the love of God through Jesus Christ.

(3) **Suffering for Christ does not mean that God is not sovereign over all things.** It does not mean that Satan has out-witted God or overpowered the Almighty. Consider the words of Joseph who knew what it meant to suffer for the Lord at the hands of his own brothers (Genesis 50:20; Romans 8:28).

(4) **Suffering for Christ does not mean God is not good.** As a result of Christ’s death and resurrection, even suffering for Christ has been transformed into a sanctifying means of grace, for we have now been delivered from all of the evil of afflictions (“It is good for me that I have been afflicted” Psalm 119:71). Our suffering as Christians is not God’s way of getting even with us, but is actually a

means of making us more like our Savior, who “learned obedience by the things that He suffered” (Hebrews 5:8).

(5) **Suffering for Christ is not suffering for sin in your life (1 Peter 4:15-16).**

Even when we suffer God’s loving discipline for our sin, God uses that for our good (Hebrews 12:5-6). But that is not the same thing as suffering for the righteous cause of Christ.

(6) **Suffering for Christ is not meritorious.** You are not made more acceptable before God or more righteous in His sight by your suffering, for all your righteousness yet falls short of God’s glorious perfection. You can never be made righteous before God by your suffering (this is a false principle upon which the Romish doctrine of purgatory and penance is based). Suffering is a means of God sanctifying us and glorifying God, but suffering cannot cleanse you of sin, nor make you absolutely righteous before God. Dear ones, there is no redemptive value in your suffering for sin. There is only redemptive value in the suffering of Christ (the God-man) for sin (according to Hebrews 10:12).

(7) **Suffering for Christ is not limited to bodily persecution from the enemies of God, but may include bodily afflictions, the loss of family members, the loss of material possessions and the rejection by family and friends (all of these we see in the suffering of Job).** Job’s suffering was for his faithfulness to the Lord God. Dear ones, all Christians suffer for Christ, but not all Christians suffer in the same way.

b. **What then does it mean to suffer for Christ?**

(1) **It is receiving from the world, the flesh, and the devil affliction of some kind, because you belong to Christ and stand for His truth and righteousness.** It means you are hated by the world, the flesh, and the devil, but loved by God as His own beloved child.

(2) **Suffering for Christ is a powerful testimony to you and to others that you are united to Christ.** When we see throughout history the faithful witnesses and martyrs for Christ enduring ghastly torture, stripped of house and possessions, imprisoned in filth and darkness, and burned alive, we see their commitment to Jesus Christ. If Christ were bodily present, His enemies would persecute Him, but since He is not present, they persecute His disciples. In this way suffering for Christ means God love us dearly, just as He loves His only begotten Son.

(3) **Suffering for Christ is a means of making you humble and more like Christ** (2 Corinthians 4:8-10).

(4) **Suffering for Christ is a means by which the Lord prepares you for heaven** (2 Corinthians 4:17-18).

(5) **Suffering for Christ unites God’s people together as one** (Philippians 1:27). For all true Christians suffer for Christ and His truth in one way or another.

(6) **Suffering for Christ is as much a gracious gift from God as is faith in Christ.** It is freely bestowed upon all who embrace Christ and demonstrates their adoption as God’s own beloved children. Therefore, you rejoice in your sonship by rejoicing in your suffering for Christ.

B. In closing, dear ones, if you are truly suffering for Christ and not for your own sin, there is one question you must avoid asking: It is the question, “Why?”

1. Why has the Lord brought this into my life or into the life of my loved ones, when I have sought to stand faithfully for Him? Why has my endeavor to uphold the righteousness and truth of Christ brought such suffering into my life? Joy will never be found in endlessly asking that question. Dear ones, if God told you why you were suffering, it would not make the pain go away.

2. Furthermore, you would probably second guess God and His all-wise plan. And so rather than asking “Why?”, you should always bring yourself back to child-like trust in the One true living God who is almighty, all-wise, all-loving, all-merciful, and all-faithful (and who, therefore, can never make a mistake). Dear ones, are you suffering for Christ? Are you suffering like Christ in humble dependence upon a faithful Father

who can do you no wrong? Fall upon your face before such a gracious God, who has given you such a powerful means of driving you outside yourself and your own comfort zone in order that His power might be made perfect in your weakness.

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