

Sermon – 13/07/2008 am

Suffering and Glory

Study Text: Ephesians 3:13

Paul was in prison in Rome when he wrote this letter to the church at Ephesus. Most of the people at Ephesus knew him personally for he founded the local assembly on his third missionary journey. Most of the congregation were Gentiles. Paul was a Jew but was commissioned by the Risen Jesus as the apostle to the Gentiles.

Paul took this divine commissioning very seriously. He faced concerted opposition from the Jews for not demanding that the Gentile believers become Jews first by submitting to Mosaic Law, and in particular circumcision. He was forced out of the synagogue in many cities including Ephesus. He preached in private homes or public lecture halls. Paul was in prison because he stood up for Gentile believers and their freedom in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Suffering

Before we look at Paul suffering for the gospel we will firstly look at the suffering of Jesus of Nazareth. Paul learnt about suffering from the Lord Jesus Christ. He knew how much Jesus suffered in this world for he had been an arch opponent of Jesus. But after his conversion he understood that it was in fact through his suffering that Jesus was glorified.

Paul began this chapter saying that he was a *prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles*. He went on to write of the mystery of Christ that was made known to him. This mystery was the wonderful grace revealed in Jesus Christ and its availability to Jew and Gentile alike. God's eternal purpose was accomplished in Jesus Christ, in his death and resurrection.

For victory and glory to be accomplished through suffering and death is something very strange in the eyes of the world, and in the eyes of Satan. For an earthly king death means defeat, not victory. The Jews who killed Jesus, and Satan who inspired them, thought that by killing Jesus that would be the end of him and his followers. They were gravely mistaken. Jesus died according to God's eternal plan, not in spite of it (Acts 2:23). It was God's purpose for his only begotten Son to suffer and die, for through his death he gained victory over death. 'The death of death in the death of Christ' is how the puritan John Owen put it in the title of his book.

Jesus knew that in the cross he would be glorified. In his prayer in the upper room on the night before his death he said *Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son that your Son may glorify you* (John 17:1). He was going to die but he spoke of glory. On an earlier occasion he spoke in the same way: *The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified* (John 12:23). He went on to declare a divine truth saying *unless a grain of wheat fall to the ground and dies it remains alone, but if it dies it produces much grain. He who loves his life will lose it but he who hates his life in this world keeps it for eternal life*.

The apostle Paul lived out this doctrine in his life. He was not concerned whether he lived or died. He was concerned for only one thing, the kingdom of God. He wrote to the Philippians complaining that *all seek their own and not the things of Jesus Christ* (Philippians 2:21). See

also what he wrote to the Corinthians. 'We who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake. We are hard pressed on every side, persecuted and struck down' (II Corinthians 4:8-11). He was not feeling sorry for himself as if this was unusual or unexpected. This was the norm for a follower of Jesus Christ.

On his way to Rome Paul was shipwrecked and then bitten by a poisonous snake. Prior to this horrific journey he had been in jail for over two years without a trial. He was in jail because the Jews thought he had taken some Gentiles in the temple. They grabbed him and were stoning him when the police came and rescued him. In other places Paul was beaten and whipped, stoned and left for dead. Life for him as a follower of Christ and especially as the apostle to the Gentiles was no bed of roses.

But Paul had learned the sufficiency of the grace and strength of the Lord. He did not despair, nor was he crushed and destroyed (II Corinthians 4). He rejoiced that the life of Jesus was manifested in his body. He rejoiced that *our light affliction...is working a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory* (II Corinthians 4:17).

Discouraged

Therefore I ask that do not lose heart at my tribulations for you (3:13). Paul was in chains because of his ministry to the Gentiles but he did not blame them, nor did he want them to be discouraged in any way because of his suffering. Their father in the faith was in trouble and they would naturally be concerned for his welfare. If one part of the body suffers the whole body suffers.

But more than this, some may have been wondering how come God was allowing his servant Paul to suffer like this. He was a 'good and honest' man; indeed he was innocent before the law and should not have been in prison. How could an all-loving and all powerful God allow this? 'Where is the victory that Jesus promised' some may have been asking.

If this was the thinking of some at Ephesus they were not the first and not the last to fall away because of suffering. 'I was envious of the wicked for they are not in trouble; they are always at ease and getting rich' complained the Psalmist (Psalm 73). To be associated with a prisoner, a loser in the eyes of the world, was more than some could bear.

It still happens today. There are those 'who come to Christ' on the understanding that they will have an 'abundant life', often because this was the gospel they heard. When tough times come, when the name of Christ brings ridicule and opposition, they start to doubt. Imagine if this suffering included assault, imprisonment, and torture – which is what many believers in the world today face when they confess the name of Jesus Christ.

Jesus spoke about falling away in the parable of the soils. Remember the seed that fell on rocky ground. It came up and flourished for a while but having no depth of soil and no deep root it withered away. Jesus said that this is like the person who stumbles when trouble or persecution comes because of the word (Matthew 13:21).

Jesus saw many disciples turn away when his teaching got difficult or unacceptable. Many still stumble because of some teaching of Jesus that they find in the Bible, whether it be the truth of creation, the truth of sin and the Fall, of the virgin birth and miracles, or of divine

judgment. There are those who deny such truths but go on calling themselves Christians anyway.

Paul asked the saints at Ephesus not to faint or lose heart because of his suffering. In fact he told them that his suffering was for their glory.

Glory

To speak of glory in the same sentence as suffering is beyond the understanding of most people – but not Paul. Paul understood that in the wisdom of the infinite and eternal God, glory is born of suffering. He saw this in the life of Jesus Christ his Lord. What did Jesus say as he faced the cross? *Now the Son of Man is glorified and the God is glorified in him* (John 13:31).

Paul said *I consider the suffering of this present time not worthy to be compared with the glory that will be revealed in us* (Romans 8:18). He rejoiced in his suffering for the gospel and wanted others to have the same attitude. The gospel is a gospel of grace; the grace of God in Jesus Christ, grace that keeps us from being separated from Jesus even in the darkest hour.

While suffering leads to glory in the kingdom of God it is not a simple causal relationship akin to the saying ‘no pain, no gain’. We do not seek out suffering; we do not self-inflict pain with the thought that we will become stronger people. The context here is the kingdom of God. It is suffering for Christ in the kingdom of God. The suffering and the glory are ‘in Christ’.

What does Paul mean by saying ‘your glory’ to the saints at Ephesus? Should it not be ‘to the glory of Christ’. We have heard Jesus prayer just before his death saying, *Father glorify me together with yourself* (John 17:5). What is true for the only begotten Son is also true for adopted sons in this matter.

When a child achieves something and is given praise, the father of the child shares in that praise. He is proud of his child. The glory given to that child is ultimately because of what he received from his father or from his parents. His parents gave him his life.

When Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego refused to deny Christ they were thrown into the fiery furnace. Christ saved them through this ordeal. They were given great honour and God was glorified.

So it is with you when you stand firm in the Lord Jesus Christ. When you remain faithful through a ‘trial by fire’ you are accorded glory by God, for God himself is glorified. A crown of glory is reserved for you who through patient endurance remain faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ unto death.

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