

So Why Are You Suffering?
Philippians 1:27-30; 2 Corinthians 12:9
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As you thank the Lord for all of His gracious gifts to you, don't forget to thank Him for the gracious gift of suffering. Yes, you heard me correctly. Suffering for Jesus is a gracious gift bestowed upon all those who trust in Him alone for their eternal salvation. In fact, suffering for Jesus is not a curse, but rather a blessing according to our text. It is one of the most powerful evidences of your salvation in Jesus Christ.

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.

As in all areas of our Christian life, we believe what the Lord has said, because He is faithful and true and He cannot lie. May the Lord teach us not to despise any gift given to us by God, and that especially goes for the gift of suffering. Though it may be difficult to understand how suffering for Christ is a gracious gift from God, let us be willing students to learn in the school of Christ.

From our text, we would note three exhortations given to Christians in the midst of their sufferings: (1) Stand as One in Suffering for Christ (Philippians 1:27); (2) Don't Fear Your Adversaries in Your Suffering (Philippians 1:28); and (3) Suffering for Christ Is a Gracious Gift (Philippians 1:29-30).

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

A. The Apostle Paul is the human writer of this inspired letter, which was written during his first Roman imprisonment in about 63-64 a.d. He was released soon after this letter was written, but was imprisoned 3-4 years later and beheaded by godless Nero. However, Paul was not fearful, bitter, or feeling sorry for himself in this letter, but was focused on serving Jesus and others (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 Jesus. This is one of the chief themes Paul communicates in this letter: one can rejoice in the Lord in the midst of suffering for Christ. You are not doomed to misery because of your suffering. If you are suffering for Christ, you can learn to rejoice.

B. 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" as Paul experienced in Philippians 1:30).

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 you are, and they hate the citizens of Christ's kingdom—nothing unusual about this. Take up your cross—follow Jesus.

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." In the midst of suffering for Christ, we must allow our afflictions to draw us closer to one another rather than to divide us (not like Job's wife who told Job to curse God and die, Job 2:9), for 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 each of ours as well. We cannot stand aloof from one another when we

undergo trials, suffering, or persecution, but must all the more pull together. For 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 of love, truth, and covenant. 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 and compassion).

E. We may be inclined to think suffering is an obstacle to us. But when the suffering of one becomes the suffering of us all, it is not an obstacle in Christ's kingdom. It promotes our love and unity in the truth (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12). We must come alongside one another in our sufferings, for they are not the sufferings of merely one member, but the sufferings of all of us as Christians bound together by covenant.

II. Don't Fear Your Adversaries in Your Suffering (Philippians 1:28).

A. Paul next exhorts the Philippians not to be terrified by those adversaries who are the means by which suffering comes (whether spiritual, illness, circumstances, or people). The adversaries of these believers were hostile Jews or Romans (who were very often used as instruments of persecution against Christians). We need not fear our greatest enemies, even when they cast us into prison, deprive us of our liberties, or seek to silence our testimony for the truth (this will increasingly be the case). Why? For two reasons.

1. Our suffering for Christ (according to our text) at their hands is a token (or proof) of the judgment to fall upon them. They are not merely persecuting a Christian for maintaining the truth of God, but are persecuting the whole body of Christ, and even the Head of that body, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself (example of Paul). They may even take delight in our suffering, but our suffering at their hands is proof to us of their impending judgment, for they are persecuting Christ. The Lord will not be mocked—whatsoever they sow, that will they also reap.

2. Our suffering for Christ is also a remarkable proof or evidence of our own salvation (according to our text). How is that you ask? Your voluntary 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 5:11-12). By this means, you can turn that which is fearful into something which is encouraging. How can adversaries overcome you with fear, when such truths assure you that Jesus has and will overcome your adversaries and save you now and for all eternity?

B. Thus, the second exhortation of the apostle Paul is, "Don't fear your adversaries in you suffering for Christ."

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 ("it is given"=*echaristhē* from the noun, *charisma*).

1. Saving faith to embrace Jesus Christ as your only righteousness and salvation is not something you naturally possess (2 Thessalonians 3:2). We are all dead in our trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1). We are lifeless and without faith until God raises us spiritually from the dead and graciously gives us faith. There is nothing you can do to earn the gift of faith (Ephesians 2:8). Saving faith is trusting in Jesus to justify you, sanctify you, and glorify you as He has promised in His Word. Saving faith is unlike other graces flowing from our salvation, for saving faith is the only instrument by which you receive the salvation promised to you in Christ. You are not justified by repentance or love, but by faith alone. Saving faith looks to the righteousness of Christ, and receives that perfect righteousness as his/her own, rather than looking to oneself for any qualification. Repentance and love are the fruit of saving faith. From saving faith flows every other grace which God gives to you.

2. The second gracious gift is that of suffering for Jesus. Saving faith unites you to Jesus, and suffering for Him demonstrates that you have been united to Him by faith alone (2 Timothy 2:12).

a. **What suffering for Christ is not.**

(1) **Suffering for Christ is not an evidence of your lack of faith.** Consider that the prophets and apostles all suffered for their faith in the one true living God (Hebrews 12). 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 love you.** To the contrary, suffering for Christ is a proof of His love for you and your salvation (Philippians 1:28). Are you also to conclude that God the Father did not love His only begotten Son, because Jesus suffered more than anyone else while on earth? Of course not! Suffering for Christ actually brings God's good and loving blessings into your life (Psalm 119:67,71).

(3) **Suffering for Christ does not mean 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 holy/fair.** Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, suffering and death have been transformed for the Christian into a sanctifying means of grace; for you have been delivered from the curse and all of the evil of afflictions (Galatians 3:13). Your suffering as a Christian is not God's way of getting even with you, but is actually a means of making you more like your Savior (Hebrews 5:8).

(5) **Suffering for Christ is not suffering because you have broken His commandments, but because you have kept His commandments** (1 Peter 4:15-16). Suffering because you (as a child of God) have broken God's commandments is God loving discipline not punishment (Hebrews 12). Praise God for His loving discipline. It is a great blessing, but it is not suffering for the truth or righteousness of Jesus.

(6) **Suffering for Christ is not meritorious.** You are not made righteous in God's sight or made more acceptable before Him by your suffering; for all your righteousness yet falls short of God's glorious perfection. You can never be made righteous or perfect by your suffering (this is the false doctrine of the Church of Rome upon which purgatory and penance is based). 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 (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 which we see in the suffering of Job). Dear ones, all Christians suffer for Christ, but not all Christians suffer for Him in the same way.

b. **What suffering for Christ is?**

(1) **It is receiving from Satan (or other adversaries) affliction/persecution of some kind because you belong to Jesus and stand for His truth and righteousness.** It means you are hated by Satan, but loved by God. It is suffering for Christ's truth and righteousness, not for sin and error.

(2) **Suffering for Christ is a powerful outward testimony that you are united to Christ.** If Christ were bodily present, His enemies would persecute Him. But since He is not present, they persecute you, His disciples.

(3) **Suffering for Christ is a means of humbling you that you might be more like Him** (2 Corinthians 4:8-10). To be like Jesus is to be like Him in standing for His truth and righteousness because you love Him.

(4) **Suffering for Christ is a way in which the Lord prepares you for heaven**—your hope is in heaven (Romans 8:16-17). The suffering of this world causes you to yearn for the glories of heaven.

(5) **Suffering for Christ unites God's people together as one** (Philippians 1:27). When one suffers, we all suffer.

(6) **Suffering for Christ is used to draw the elect to Himself and to comfort others** (2 Timothy 2:9-10; 2 Corinthians 1:3).

B. If you as a child of God are not suffering for your own sin (like David in Psalm 32 and Psalm 51), there is one question you must avoid asking: It is the question, "Why?" 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 in upholding the truth and righteousness of Christ?"

1. Joy will never be found in endlessly asking that question. For if God told you His grand purpose in your suffering, it would not make the pain go away. Furthermore, you would likely second guess God and His all-wise plan.

2. Rather than asking "Why?"; cast yourself upon His mercy and as a child of God trust in your loving Father who is almighty, all-wise, all-loving, all-merciful, all-faithful and who can never make a mistake.

3. 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? Suffering is not pleasant or comfortable, but it is 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 (2 Corinthians 12:9).

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