

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL THROUGH THE SUFFERING OF HIS PEOPLE Acts 21:23-36

INTRODUCTION

It is God's will that all Christians share in the sufferings of Jesus Christ and that they do so joyfully. It is not God's will that Christians live free from the pains of financial deprivation, physical and mental illness, relational turmoil, accidents, the unjust hatred of others, persecution, betrayal, and the countless other ways that humans can suffer. It is a lie from the pit of hell that if you follow Jesus faithfully and trust him with your life that God will rescue you in this life from all the pains and problems that beset the human race. It is a demonic teaching which says that bad things happen to Christians because they are not trusting God enough. Rather, as I said, it is God's will that all Christians share in the sufferings of Jesus and they do so joyfully.

This truth is stated from one end of the Bible to the other. Here are three statements from the NT that say this: Romans 8:16-17, "The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs--heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him." Paul says there will be no children of God in heaven who did not suffer with Christ. 1 Peter 2:20-21, "But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps." Peter says every Christian is called to suffer unjust treatment from others and to not retaliate but endure it because this is how Jesus lived and we are to live like him. 1 Peter 4:12-13, 19, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in Christ's sufferings that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed... Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good." Peter says that experiencing a fiery trial ought not to surprise us or seem strange to us, rather it is God's will and we should rejoice that we are participating in the sufferings of Jesus.

The fact that Christians share in the sufferings of Christ, which is declared as proposition in the letters in the NT is declared through story in the book of Acts. (As a reminder, when we read the stories of the Bible, like this story of Paul's beating and arrest, we are not simply reading history but learning theology through history.) As we have followed Paul's journey from Corinth to Jerusalem we have seen that this is God's will. God wants Paul to go to Jerusalem, to deliver the financial gift he has collected and to demonstrate the unity of the Gentile church with the Jewish church by his willing participation in Jewish rituals associated with four Jewish Christian men who were completing the Nazarite vow in the temple. We have also seen that God the HS has told him repeatedly that when he gets to Jerusalem he will be arrested and imprisoned. Thus we have noted that it is God's will for Paul to go to Jerusalem and to be put in prison by the Romans. Luke has also shown that all that Paul does and all that happens to him in Jerusalem is God's will for him by recording these historical events in such a way that Paul's trip to Jerusalem is seen as a sort of reenactment of Jesus' final trip to Jerusalem where he was crucified. We noted several ways he did this on the journey itself but right now I want you to see the ways in which Paul's being assaulted by the Jews and "rescued" by the Roman soldiers highlight that Paul is following in the footsteps of Jesus.

First, Paul's suffering takes place in Jerusalem the same place that Jesus' suffering occurred. Second, Paul, like Jesus, chose the suffering. He, like Jesus, knew this would happen when he got to Jerusalem and he went there knowing this would happen. Third, Paul, like Jesus, endures this suffering by himself. Fourth, Paul, like Jesus, is engaged in obeying the Law of Moses and doing good for the sake of others when he is accosted. Fifth, Paul is falsely accused of teaching against the people of Israel, the law of Moses and the temple and he is falsely accused of bringing a Gentile into the temple courts which was an act punishable by death. Paul was in the act of being cleansed from defilement according to the law while accused of defiling the temple in contradiction to the law. This is just like the false accusations brought against Jesus. Sixth, His accusers cannot agree on what

their accusations are (v.34) just like Jesus' accuser's testimony did not agree (Mark 14:56). Seventh, Paul and his message about Jesus are rejected by the Jews. This is emphasized by Luke's recording of the fact that as soon as the enraged Jewish mob had dragged Paul out of the temple, the doors to the temple were shut. The gospel of God is shut out of the place where God's name is supposed to be worshipped. The same absolute rejection of Jesus and his gospel of the kingdom is vividly portrayed in the gospels. Thus both Paul and Jesus suffered because the Jewish people rejected Jesus as their Messiah and Savior. Eighth, both Paul and Jesus are accused by the Jews but arrested by the Romans. Ninth, in both cases the Romans prove more sympathetic than do the Jews. Finally, in v.36 the Jewish mob cries out about Paul, "Away with him!" which are the same words the Jewish mob cried out in regard to Jesus (Luke 23:18), "But they all cried out together, "Away with this man, and release to us Barabbas..."

These similarities are not accidental. By recording the history in this fashion, God by the hand of Luke is letting us know that Paul is sharing in the sufferings of Jesus by the will of God. Thus the suffering of Paul shares certain things in common with the sufferings of Jesus. It is important to recognize that Jesus' suffering stands apart, unique in many ways but primarily in the fact that his suffering and death paid the penalty for every believer's sins, while Paul's sufferings have no atoning value. What I want to do this morning is to use the suffering of Paul as recorded here in his being falsely accused, beaten and then unjustly arrested to look at the purposes of suffering. By suffering I mean all the losses and deprivations and pains and turmoil and trouble that we experience in this life as we faithfully follow Jesus. I'm not talking about the difficulties we bring upon ourselves by our own sins. I don't have time to show you that the Bible expects us to think about and to respond to the suffering of persecution the same way we respond to the suffering of disease and accident and a bad economy. If you have questions about the appropriateness of this, please talk with me.

The question I hope to answer is this: Why is it God's will that all Christians share in the sufferings of Jesus? I can tell you both from personal experience and on the basis of God's word that you need to know the answer to that question. Suffering and pain always challenge our faith. Suffering calls into question God's love and goodness and power. Thus I aim to prepare you for the suffering that God intends to send to you so that when it comes you are not destroyed but helped by it as God wants you to be. There are many issues regarding the suffering of God's people that I will not address this morning. If you want to consider more about the place of suffering in our lives there are several resources I would recommend. I preached about a dozen sermons in the fall of 2002 in a series entitled "Where is God when it hurts?" Those sermons deal with more issues than I will deal with this morning. The best and shortest treatment of this subject is the tenth chapter of Dr. John Piper's book, "Desiring God." A book length treatment of the subject that is full of help for us in our sufferings is Jerry Bridges' book, "Trusting God." Both of these books are in the church library.

So, the story of Paul's being attacked by a Jewish mob and arrested by the Romans is given to us to show that...

MAIN POINT

It is God's will that Christians share in the sufferings of Jesus because...

I. Like Jesus we suffer for the sake of love for the people of God (Acts 21:17-27)

This story begins with Paul in the temple of God. He is there completing his ritual purification according to the Law of Moses. He is also there to pay for the sacrifices of the four Jewish Christian men who are completing their Nazarite vow. As I explained last week this means he paid over \$1000 in today's currency to buy all the sacrifices these four men had to make in order to complete their vow. If you will remember, Paul is in the temple in the first place for the sake of his Jewish Christian brothers and sisters who are zealous for the Law of Moses. He is sacrificing his time and money and convictions in order to demonstrate to his brothers that he is not the enemy of the Law of Moses. By doing this his aim is to preserve the unity of the church which Jesus died to create. He is only in the temple because of his love for other Christians. It is while he is involved in this work to benefit his brothers and sisters in Christ that he is accused and attacked by non-Christian Jews. Jewish men from Ephesus have recognized Paul and his Gentile traveling companion, Trophimus, who also was a resident of Ephesus. He is attacked for preaching the gospel of Christ which includes telling both Jews and

Gentiles that you can only be forgiven and accepted and loved by God through faith in Christ and not through obeying the OT law. These Jewish men are exhibiting the same hostility the Jewish leaders exhibited towards Jesus and the same hostility the Jewish community in Jerusalem exhibited towards the apostles and then Stephen, the first Christian martyr, and the same hostility of the Jewish communities in every town in which Paul has preached the gospel. They do not view Paul as a loving person but as someone who disrespects and is out to harm their religion and thus they attack him and aim to kill him.

We know that Paul has been expecting this attack. For the ten days he has been in Jerusalem he has been waiting for this to happen because the HS has told him to expect it. Paul made it abundantly clear on his way to Jerusalem that it didn't matter to him what happened to him in Jerusalem as he knew that God wanted him to come to Jerusalem for the sake of the gospel and the church. It is because he loves Christians that he is getting beat up. He says about himself (2 Timothy 2:10), "I endure everything for the sake of the elect that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory." In another letter he writes (Col. 1:24), "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sakes..." Just as Jesus "...loved the church and gave himself up for her..." so Paul loves the church and endures everything for the sake of the church. His affection is not simply for some impersonal organization called the church but he has affection for the particular people that make up each church. He says to the Thessalonians, "we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us." To the Philippians he says, "I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus." Paul is being like his savior. Jesus' suffering and death was motivated by his love for us, his people, his sheep, the elect of God. His love for us cost him his life. So also, Paul's love for the church causes him to take risks and to willingly and joyfully, as he says, suffer all manner of loss for the sake of the church.

The risks we take and the suffering that we endure because we love other Christians is the proof that we love other Christians and thus the reason sharing in Christ's sufferings is the will of God for us. "God demonstrates his love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." In the same way we demonstrate our love, which is the love of Jesus, for other Christians by our dying to the pleasures of this world to render aid and assistance to them. This suffering is not reserved for only leaders in the church but is for all who call themselves Christians. Paul makes this clear in Ephesians 5:1-2 when he says, "Be imitators of God therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us..."

God is not calling every Christian to get beat up and arrested in order to show your love for other believers, for the church. However, it is his will that every one of us who names the name of Jesus suffer the loss of earthly goods and pleasures because we find loving other believers better than these goods and pleasures. The mothers of infants and toddlers joyfully share in Christ's sufferings by losing sleep as they get up in the middle of the night to feed their babies. They lose out on adult interaction and the freedom to go where they want in order to care for these little ones entrusted to them. Our team to Mongolia shared in Christ's sufferings to love the church in Mongolia. They gave up vacation time and earnings and time with family and friends and the comforts of the U.S. for the joy of loving our brothers and sisters in Mongolia in helping them prepare the house for church planters to live in out in the village of Yuruu. They risked disease and injury and some suffered from disease and injury to love these friends in Christ. Christian husbands give up their right to watch football in order to go shopping at the craft store with their wives. Christian wives provide snacks and drinks so their husbands and sons can watch football games. Members of churches joyfully clean the toilets for love of the other members of their churches. We sing music in church we don't like because we know other believers whom we love like that style of music. There are countless ways we give up our rights and the pleasures of this world because we delight to love other Christians. What makes us happy is that others find their happiness in the love of Jesus and so we seek to maximize our pleasure by giving up our rights to increase the joy of others in Jesus. It is God's will that every Christian love other Christians and thus it is God's will that every Christian lose time and money and earthly pleasure in order to love others.

It is God's will that Christians share in the sufferings of Jesus because...

- *Like Jesus we suffer for the sake of love for the people of God*
- *And because...*

II. Like Jesus we suffer in hope of future joy (Hebrews 12:2, Romans 8:18)

God has promised us in Christ eternal and infinite joy. However, while we are given tastes of that eternal joy in the present, yet the fullness of it will not be ours until that day when Jesus returns and gives to us immortal, resurrected bodies and takes us to live with him in the new heavens and the new earth. Thus the people of God, throughout the Bible are described as a pilgrim people, a people who are on a journey to our heavenly home. We are a people who are waiting for our promised, future reward and living now in light of the fact that the fullness of joy is in the future. In Hebrews 11, which describes those OT men and women who lived by faith, the author says that their lives can only be explained because they were not looking for a reward in the present but in the future. For example, we are told that Moses chose to suffer mistreatment with the people of God rather than enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin because he considered the reproach of Christ of greater worth than the riches of Egypt because he was looking forward to the reward. Moses gave up a life of wealth and power and luxury in order to join in the sufferings of God's people because of his joyful anticipation of living with God forever in the new heavens and the new earth. All of Jesus' parables about the kingdom of God are oriented towards the future. In virtually every parable Jesus is teaching us to trust and obey him in the present because of our desire to be rewarded by him in the future. Paul reminds us that our citizenship is in heaven and we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. Everywhere in the Bible it is the confident expectation of that future glory that motivates and enables the loss of present comfort.

Jesus, we are told in Hebrews 12:2 "endured the cross, despising the shame" for the joy set before him. He was able to willingly choose the suffering of hell, of God's wrath on that cross, because he knew that after hell came the glory of being with his Father forever together with all those who would trust in him. Paul says in Romans 8:18, right after saying that every Christian who shares in the glory of Christ has also shared in the sufferings of Christ, "I consider our present sufferings not even worth comparing to the glory to be revealed to us." Paul chose a life of suffering love because he knew that there was no loss he would ever experience that would not be infinitely repaid at the resurrection of the dead. In fact, in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 he says that there is a direct, proportional relationship between the sufferings endured in and with Jesus here and the glory of heaven. It is this confident expectation of future glory that enables him to go to Jerusalem knowing that he is going to be beaten and imprisoned. It is this confident expectation of future happiness that keeps him from complaining about his troubled life. He knows that whatever trouble comes to him while he follows Jesus is only temporary and not only cannot keep him from heaven but will make heaven more enjoyable.

It is this preoccupation with heaven that enables us to love others no matter the cost and to joyfully do the will of God whatever evil befalls us. We do not stop loving God and people, we do not quit doing the will of God because something bad happens to us because we are not living for a happy life on planet earth but we are living for the eternal kingdom of God. Whatever trouble comes our way here is only temporary, whereas heaven is forever. We are people on our way to the eternal city and we will not stop until we have reached our destination. Then will be our rest. Then will be our reward. Then will be our healing and happiness. Now, there are the pains and problems of traveling through the wilderness with a bunch of other sinners.

Most of you know that our oldest son, Jared, suffered a massive head injury in a skiing accident in February of 2002. By God's grace given to me through the teaching ministry of men like Dr. John Piper, I knew and taught the necessity of sharing in the sufferings of Jesus in hope prior to Jared's accident. Thus, from the beginning I found strength to not despair and not give up and not forsake God and to care for Jared because this is only temporary. I am able to keep believing and keep obeying because I know that Jared has lost nothing of eternal value but indeed all of his suffering will result in a more glorious experience in heaven and I know that our losses will be but a dim memory during the coming eons of life with God. The joys of eternity with Jesus will more than compensate for the sufferings we've experienced here. It is because we expect future joy that we joyfully share in the sufferings of Jesus now.

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- *Like Jesus we suffer in hope of future joy*
- *And because...*

III. Like Jesus we suffer for the glory of God (John 17:4, Acts 20:24, 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1)

Jesus said in his prayer in the upper room on the night before he was betrayed that he had brought glory to his Father on the earth by doing the work his Father assigned him to do, which was to suffer and die for believing sinners. Ultimately, Jesus suffered and died to show the world that God the Father was the best and greatest of all beings. His life from the incarnation to the ascension and even now in eternity was about this one thing: showing that God the Father was marvelous and worthy of all love and trust and honor. The apostle Paul said in Acts 20:24 that he considered his own life as nothing if only he might complete the task the Lord Jesus had given him, the task of testifying to the grace of God. His firm resolve to complete the task was not due to the significance of the task itself but because of who assigned him the task. He would be faithful to do the task, no matter the cost to make clear the glory of the one who gave it to him. The worth of Jesus was revealed in Paul's joyful proclamation of the gospel regardless of what happened. In 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1 Paul connects these things. He says a life lived in service to men so that they might be saved is the only life that glorifies, that is, makes plain and obvious, the beauty of the Triune God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

It is the sufferings that we experience in these paths of obedience that magnify and manifest the greatness of God above everything else. Pastor John Piper in his book "Desiring God" (p.266) makes this exact point as he discusses various passages where Paul talks about the place of suffering in his life. Dr. Piper writes, "Paul stresses that in our sufferings the glory of Christ's all-sufficient grace is magnified. If we rely on him in our calamity and He sustains our 'rejoicing in hope', then he is shown to be the all-satisfying God of grace and strength that he is. If we hold fast to him 'when all around our soul gives way', then we show that he is more to be desired than all we have lost... So suffering clearly is designed by God not only as a way to wean Christians off of self and onto grace, but also as a way to spotlight that grace and make it shine."

The history of the church is full of examples of men and women and children who have willingly endured unspeakable pain and suffering because of the beauty and glory of Jesus. They have believed that to have Jesus and torture or death is infinitely better than no torture or death and no Jesus. Polycarp was a pastor of the church in Smyrna in the second century. When he was in his 80's persecution broke out against the Christians in the Roman Empire and he was seized and brought before the Roman proconsul in his town. The proconsul demanded that he recant and renounce Christ or he would be burned at the stake. Polycarp replied, "Eighty and six years have I served him and he has done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my king who saved me?" The glory and honor of Jesus mattered more to him than his own life. This is the ultimate reason for why we endure the sufferings of Jesus, it is because Jesus is better to us than all else and so that we can show by our joyful endurance that Jesus is better than everyone and everything else. To have him and to lose the world is to have lost nothing. In my life it is the fact that Jesus is better than a healthy and successful-in-this-life Jared that ultimately sustains me. God ordains the suffering in our lives and as we patiently endure and joyfully continue to trust in Jesus and do good, in the midst of the trouble, we experience the all satisfying glory of Jesus and we show that Jesus is best.

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- *Like Jesus we suffer in hope of future joy*
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