

# The Gift of Suffering

PHILIPPIANS 1:28-30

08/12/07

You know, sometimes we are slow to recognize something as a gift aren't we? Take your parents, for example. When you were a teenager and you wanted to begin to make your own decisions, it may have seemed at the time like your parents were only there to say no or to ruin your well laid plans. You did not look at the authority and guidance of your parents as a gift at all. Such a restraint on your freedom seemed more like a curse than a gift. If you are a currently a teenager you may be feeling this way right now. We all felt it when we were your age. But later on, we grew up and started living on our own. We were free to do whatever we wanted to do. And at some point after you've been on your own a while, you wake up and realize that your parents are a great gift. Especially when you start having children of your own you began to appreciate what your parents did in raising you.

As I said, it often takes time to realize that some things are truly gifts of God. There are two gifts mentioned in verse 29 that we are hesitant to actually acknowledge as gifts early on in our Christian lives. I am talking about the gift of faith and the gift of suffering. Verse 29 says, **“For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake.”** Faith is not typically thought of as a gift when we first become Christians. We tend to think that faith was our own doing and simply the exercise of our free will. We don't stop and think at our conversion that faith was something given to us by God. We naturally think that faith is something we give to God, instead of something He gives to us. Here Paul clearly says that **“to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ... to believe in Him.”**

John Calvin said, **“Here Paul clearly testifies, that faith... is an unmerited gift of God.”** If you have been in this church for any amount of time or sat under Reformed teaching elsewhere, it is likely that you already accept this teaching that saving faith itself is the gift of God. The Westminster Confession of Faith states that **“The grace (or gift) of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts.”** You have come to understand that it was God, working in you by His Spirit, who enabled you to believe in Christ. You have come to realize that because of your previously dead and sinful heart, if you had been left to yourself, you would never have come to Christ and believed in Him.

Have you indeed come to the place where you can give God the glory for salvation in its entirety – even for the faith to receive Christ? That is what Reformed theology is all about – giving God the glory for our salvation. It is to acknowledge that **“Salvation is of the Lord.”** It is a good thing to be able to say that and mean it from your heart. But can you, with equal conviction, also say that **“Suffering is of the Lord?”** Paul says that **“To you it has been granted also to suffer for His sake.”** Have you come to the place where you view suffering as a gift? I will be the first to admit that it is much easier to accept faith as a gift of God than it is to accept suffering as His gift.

We instinctively reject suffering as something bad and undesirable. The very purpose of our nervous system is to signal us when something harmful is present so that we can avoid it. But we are told in our passage today to look at suffering as a gift of God. In order to accept this teaching we are going to have to have our minds renewed aren't we? I believe it takes a mature faith to accept that faith is God's gift and does not come about by our own doing. I believe it takes an even more mature faith to accept that suffering is a gift that God uses to sanctify us and prepare us for heaven.

Let's review briefly what we saw last week in verse 27. There are two things that Paul urges us to do in that verse. We must have conduct that is worthy of the gospel and we also must strive together for the faith of the gospel. As we work on these two areas, we will achieve more of the unity that God desires us to have in the body of Christ. Dr. Ligon Duncan states that **“Paul is urging us to realize that because we're citizens of the heavenly kingdom we're supposed to be different from the world around us. That difference produces in us a unity in our difference, which in and of itself shows our difference to the world and bears witness to the gospel.”** In other words, when our conduct is like Christ, we will achieve a high degree of unity. And when we join together to bear witness to Christ, we will achieve even greater unity.

However, the Christ-like conduct that we begin to practice and the gospel proclamation that we begin to do will result in something else that often surprises us. These things will also result in opposition, hatred and even persecution from those who are of the world. **The more you are like Jesus Christ, the less you will be like the world and the less the world will like you.** Your presence will not always be welcomed in this world because you will tend to spoil the party for those who want to live without God. You will remind them of the God they are running from and of the God they hate. And then if you open your mouth and start talking about this God and you start mentioning such things as sin, repentance and salvation in Christ... then you will sometimes find that you will be hated for it.

By the grace of God this is not true in every individual case. God's grace restrains the sin and hatred of unbelievers so that they do not always treat us with contempt. God's grace even works to soften hard hearts and bring conversion to some of the people we speak to. But in general, the truth remains, as Jesus said, **“And you will be hated by all for My name's sake.”** This hatred takes many forms. Today, for

example, we are experiencing an attack of the atheists. Recently, there have been a string of best-selling books written by militant atheists who attack religion in general and Christianity in particular. Christopher Hitchens is the author of *God is Not Great*, Sam Harris has written *The End of Faith*, and Richard Dawkins has penned *The God Delusion*. How are we as Christians to respond to these attacks? Some Christian scholars have already written books in response to each of the books by these atheists. These books are a needed and helpful response. But how are we to respond as individual believers when our faith is attacked – whether by a book, in the media or by someone on the street? How are we to respond when we are personally attacked because we have proclaimed the gospel?

First of all, Paul says that you must not be “**in any way terrified by your adversaries.**” This is a very strong negative statement. We are *not* in *any way* to be afraid of those who oppose the gospel. The word Paul uses that is translated *terrified* or *frightened* in this verse is a vivid term which is unique in the Greek NT. It denotes “**the uncontrollable stampede of startled horses.**”<sup>1</sup> When you as a believer are being attacked on account of your faith or your witness, there will be a temptation to fear. For the Philippians, their adversaries might have been false teachers within the church or it might have been the Roman authorities who later on began to persecute the church. While there is no mention of a synagogue being in Philippi, it is possible that a small group of Jews might have aroused the local pagans against the Christians.

In Philippians 3:2 Paul warns the Philippians about the *Judaisers* who were attempting to compromise the gospel of grace. The Judaisers taught that in addition to faith in Christ, believers must also keep all the *Law of Moses*. Theirs was a hybrid gospel, adding works to faith for salvation. Paul wanted them to stand firm and not

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph Martin, *Philippians, TNTC*, p. 89

compromise the gospel of free grace. In the Reformed community today we are finding that there are modern Judaisers who have come into the church peddling a gospel that is no gospel at all. Such men have muddied the water when it comes to the doctrine of justification. **Their teaching on this doctrine is an attack on heart of the faith of the gospel.** You and I must be committed to the truth and refuse to compromise the gospel of grace. Don't fall for any substitutes. Stay with the pure gospel which Paul faithfully preached in the Scriptures.

Someone might wonder today, however, about the relative lack of persecution in our own country. You may not be aware of any personal adversaries toward you as a Christian. You may feel that these verses don't have much application to your life right now. Someone has said that **"Wherever Christians will live as they ought to live in this world, where they will live righteous lives and aggressively seek to spread the gospel, in that place there will be persecution. This is true for all Christians. If you bear a proper witness for Jesus Christ, as God intends you to do, there will be persecution for you."**<sup>2</sup> Of course it will not normally be physical persecution in this country, but it will consist in other forms. Paul told the Philippians not to be terrified of their adversaries. That means they must have been living righteous lives and aggressively spreading the gospel.

Most of the time for us today, we don't have any adversaries to fear because we aren't living righteous lives and aggressively spreading the gospel. The fear for us comes in keeping us from ever really witnessing to start with. We are afraid that we will make people upset so we remain quiet and don't bother anyone. **We prefer peace and safety over the glory of our King.** The problem is that if we choose peace and safety now, by remaining silent, we will not avoid persecution. When believers refuse to take a stand and proclaim Christ openly, then the culture continues on a downward

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<sup>2</sup> James M. Boice, *Philippians – An Expository Commentary*, p. 106

slide toward godlessness. The more ungodly our culture becomes, the more such unbelief will result in persecution of believers. So, persecution will come eventually, even if we don't witness aggressively. I believe that is happening now in the West.

When persecution does come, whether it is the general attacks of militant atheists or personal attacks in daily life, Paul goes on to give a reason why we are not to fear them. He said that the opposition of adversaries is **“to them a proof of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that from God.”** You see, when believers are loyal to the gospel and faithful in proclaiming it to a lost world, there will be opposition. That opposition tends to discourage us. *But it shouldn't.* That there are adversaries is a proof of something Paul says. It is a proof or token of our salvation. When you face opposition or persecution and you endure it, remaining firm in your faith, that fact is evidence of the work of God in your heart. Jesus said that in the last days many would fall away from the faith. He said that only those who persevere till the end would be saved. Perseverance in the face of persecution is good evidence of salvation.

This persecution is evidence on the other hand of the perdition of our adversaries. The word **“perdition”** occurs in the English Bible 8 times. In each of these cases it denotes the final state of ruin and punishment which is the polar opposite of salvation. It refers to the destruction which consists of eternal misery in hell. The fact that unbelievers would oppose the truth of the gospel exposes them as reprobates, designated by God for everlasting condemnation. Of course, some of them may be like Paul, who persecuted the church at first, but was later converted to Christ. But unless that happens, anyone who opposes believers and the gospel we preach is only exposing himself as unsaved, and doomed to destruction. **“Therefore, when sinners oppose your bold stance for the gospel, rejoice that God has granted you faith to believe**

**the gospel, and grace to suffer for the gospel.”**<sup>3</sup> Though we don’t rejoice in anyone going to hell, we can rejoice that God’s justice will prevail in their case. And we can rejoice that on our behalf God has satisfied His justice, through the death of His Son.

Paul said at the end of verse 28, “**and that from God.**” What did he mean here? What is from God? Well, I believe he is referring to the suffering which is a proof of our salvation. That is from God, as John Calvin said, “**that God by his blessing turns into an occasion of welfare things that might otherwise seem to render us miserable.**” How difficult it is for us to view things this way. But how necessary it is for our sanctification that we look at suffering in this way! We must look at suffering as a gift of God. As Paul said in verse 29, “**For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake.**” How is suffering a gift? A gift is something that brings some benefit to the recipient. When we suffer for Christ, God desires to give us more of His grace and favor.

That is why the Scriptures tell us over and over to rejoice when we are persecuted for Christ. God is using such suffering to shape us and mold us into the image of His Son. But not only that, we can accept suffering as a gift because it will lead to eternal reward. In Luke chapter six Jesus said, “**Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, For the Son of Man’s sake. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy! For indeed your reward is great in heaven.**” Those who live for eternity will not fear what is done to them in this life. And not only is the suffering itself a gift, so is the ability to endure the suffering. Pray for grace to endure and to respond to suffering in a Christ-like manner. We must also look to examples of perseverance in the face of suffering. Take courage from Paul himself and all the suffering he went through. In verse 30 he said, “**Having the same**

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<sup>3</sup> Vincent Cheung, *Commentary on Philippians*

**conflict which you saw in me and now hear is in me.”** The Philippians had seen Paul suffer. In Acts chapter 16 Paul was in Philippi and he commanded a demon to come out of a slave girl. She was bringing much money to her masters by supposedly telling the future. Acts 16:19 says, **“But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged *them* into the marketplace to the authorities.”** They had the two of them beaten with rods and then threw them into prison.

Some people today might think that if Paul had the power to cast out a demon, why didn't he simply use that power to avoid suffering? There are Christians today who teach that believers should not have to suffer. When I've asked such people about the suffering of the apostles, I've heard them say that the apostles were exceptions. No, they weren't exceptions. Paul said to the Philippians, **“You have heard about and seen my suffering. It has been granted to you also to suffer for Christ as I have suffered and am suffering.”** Paul is not an exception, but rather, he is an example. Christ Himself is an example. Peter says, **“For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps.”**

Today, the Christian who suffers for his or her faith seems to be the exception. Suffering for the gospel is not something we are doing much of in our culture. To be sure, more suffering will come as our culture becomes more anti-God, but even then the ones who will suffer are only those who are willing to embrace it. Suffering for Christ is not to be sought after, but it is to be embraced. **Suffering is not to be sought after, but neither is it to be avoided at all costs.** There is something truly wrong with Western Christianity when we find it so difficult to embrace such suffering for the sake of the gospel. This week you and I will have opportunities to live out our faith, to stand for the truth and to witness for Christ. We know that some sort of suffering will

accompany any serious effort in these areas. Will you embrace that suffering? Will you step out in faith and receive the gift of suffering that God may have for you?

You may have a *close friend* become angry or distant if you try to tell them about their need for Christ. You might even lose that friend. *At work*, if you start witnessing to the people around you, they might view you as a weirdo. Or worse, they might file a complaint against you. If you talk to *family members* about Christ they might not want to be around you and may chose to leave you out of the family loop. You might be misunderstood, criticized, condemned as a fundamentalist and grouped with Islamic terrorists. Recently even US senators have tried to connect conservative Christians with Islamic terrorists. More and more you and I will be viewed as *loony* and even *dangerous* to our society. If you are not suffering now, you will later – that is, if you don't deny Christ when the time comes.

Do you ever wonder what would happen to you if, like the early Christians, you were asked to deny Christ or die? Let me say that if you are not confessing Christ boldly now, it is not likely that you will confess Him under more difficult circumstances is it? And remember, the more you and I confess Him now, the more people will likely hear and believe the gospel and be saved. That is why we are here after all isn't it? It all goes back to what Paul said in verse 27 and I'll close with reading this: **“Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.”** Let us be united in our Christ-like conduct, united in proclaiming the gospel and then we will be united in suffering for His sake.