

Sermon 31: Romans 5:3-4: The Christian perspective on suffering

OUTLINE

The joys of suffering
The reasons for suffering
The benefits of suffering

INTRODUCTION

'Theodicy' is the name given to the particular problem of God and evil. A personal friend who will be known to you all is Mike Beck, the pastor of Gracenet up in Wellington. He was recently engaged in a debate at Wellington University on this very question. He was pitted against an atheist and had to defend theism in light of the problem of evil. Mike's tactic was a very simple one. The atheist is being inconsistent with his world view when he makes a value judgement by calling anything evil or wrong or bad. Value judgements belong to those who believe in a universal norm for right and wrong something that the atheist denies. Atheists have no basis to declare a thing good or bad because they believe that we are all here by accident with no purpose in being here and no design. This scientifically driven atheism is borrowing capital from the Christian worldview if it even attempts to make a critique of God in light of the problem of evil, for evil can only exist if God exists; if there is no God there is no such thing as right and wrong so atheism is bound to mere description not prescription. Christianity on the other hand has a profoundly penetrating account for the problem of evil. Christianity can answer the question of the origins of evil in the fall accounting for the present world of death and disease as well as our own sinful inclinations and demonic activity. Christianity can account for the nature of evil showing it to be in antithesis to the very character of God, enabling us to know right and wrong truthfully and not merely subjectively. Christianity can also give hope in the midst of suffering showing that a good God is in control of this world and His purposes are driving the apparently random events of nature showing that we are not the victims of fate. Christianity can also give hope and point to the time when God will undo all evil and how by Christ He has conquered satan, sin and death and the final victory is guaranteed. More than that, and this is where we want to track with Paul as he continues in Romans 5:3-4 we see that God is working out a purpose through the suffering, taking the devil's weapons of mass destruction and converting them into tools that work the exact opposite intended effect; our holiness and happiness for the glory of God.

We pick up our exposition of Romans in 5:3-4, 'More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.' Paul has been mapping out for us the many benefits that are ours if we are justified by faith in Christ. The war is over and we have peace with God, we are living under grace not law, and we boast and exult with great joy in the certainty of the glory of God. Paul however does recognise that all this talk about heaven can be seen as a 'pie in the sky' perspective so he engages with the present problem of suffering and shows that we are not simply to resign ourselves to present sufferings with all our treasure waiting for us in heaven, no the grace of God is so abundant towards us that our sufferings are

sanctified and become a vehicle of that heaven being made manifest in the here and now as we become more and more like our true selves in Christ.

Today we are going to focus our thoughts on some aspects of suffering; the joys, the reasons, and the benefits of suffering.

The joys of suffering

Paul starts us off with a very radical statement in v3, 'More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings.' Paul is very concerned to stress that our cups are running over and we are drinking out of the saucers. However, the overflow comes in a very surprising form, we boast/exult/rejoice not only in the fact that we will one day be glorified and in the presence of God, this is an understandable thing to be happy about. But Paul tells us that we are able to exult in our sufferings themselves. Not merely in the midst of them, but in the sufferings themselves. We need to be very clear that Paul is not a lunatic. He is not telling us that we will experience joy and not pain, the pain is there but the joy is not in the pain itself, we recognise that pain is part of this fallen world and do not rejoice in the sensations of pain like a masochist. Sufferings are not as some would have us believe signs of a weak God, or signs that our Christian faith is not in fact real and able to address our real problems. Sufferings are sanctified in Christ where sufferings outside of Christ can be crushing and cause a person to commit suicide. Christians have reason for boasting not suicide.

There are various reasons for joy in the NT, we see firstly that suffering for Christ, in His name, as His servant, bearing the same reproach that He bore is indeed an honour and not something that any Christian who fully sees what Christ has done for him/her should scorn. Various texts point us in this direction, "'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 'Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.' (Matt 5:10-12). 'For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake.' (Philippians 1:29).

Suffering can be a joy because we experience great comforts and the direct ministry of the Holy Spirit strengthening and enabling us, 1Peter 4:13-14, 'But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.'

However, the main reason that Paul has before us is the reason of the benefits that come to us in terms of our holiness and conformity to Christ. Suffering produces a change for good in us, in fact suffering are the hammer and chisel of God to make us more into our heavenly selves, in the hands of God they are conduits of heavenly newness to us. Paul makes this clear in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, 'So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. 17 For this light momentary affliction is

preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, 18 as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.'

A Christian's joy in suffering is by faith not by sense/sight. These things are opposite to each other and we need to nurture seeing by faith not by sense. Some of the greatest teachers in this are the puritans and those who followed. They lived a difficult life and lived out a simple faith in the midst of their trials. Ebenezer Erskine a Scottish minister in the Presbyterian Church shows us the difference between faith and sense in 9 ways.

1. Sense looks to what a man has in hand to find present joy, but faith looks to what a man has in Christ to find joy.
2. Sense judges the love of God by providence, but faith reads the love of God in the face of Jesus Christ.
3. Sense fluctuates with circumstances, but faith is fixed on the immovable promises of God.
4. Sense only looks at things present but faith like a prophet looks at things to come.
5. Sense is a natural follower, but faith is a natural leader, sense should follow faith and not vice versa.
6. Sense is superficial and is easily deceived, but faith ponders a matter and goes deeply into it.
7. Sense is impatient and quick in its judgement, but faith is patient and waits to see God's end.
8. The life of sense is a life of danger, but the life of faith is sure and safe.
9. Sense has its confidence within, but faith has its confidence without.

In order for us to learn joy in our sufferings we need to live by faith not by sense/sight. We need to learn how God's ways are not our ways and learn the paradoxes of contentment. Jeremiah Burroughs one of the Non-Conformist/Congregational ministers that was present at the Westminster assembly has written an excellent book called, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*¹. In it he covers every facet of contentment, but there is one section in particular I would like to summarise for you, he talks about the mysteries of contentment, in other words, the paradoxical nature of Christian joy and contentment, that we find our joys in different ways to the world and the ways of sin. He outlines 6 mysteries in how the Christian is able to find contentment and joy.

Mystery 1. The contented Christian is 'the most contented man in the world, and yet the most unsatisfied man in the world.'² In other words the Christian can be joyful in the greatest sufferings with God, but would not be happy if he were given all the world without God. It is this most contented person who finds contentment in the least but with God as his portion who is also the most unsatisfied with all this world's goods. Since our hearts are

¹ Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, (Chiltern Street, London, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1964), p42-54.

² Ibid., p42.

restless until they find their fill in God, having tasted the fullness of God as our portion we will necessarily be discontent to the extent God satisfies us.

Mystery 2. 'The Christian comes to contentment, not so much by way of addition, as by subtraction.'³ Contrary to all advertisement campaigns true happiness is not found in the accumulation of new things. No the Christian finds joy and contentment not in adding to their possessions or pleasures but in subtracting from their desires. The secret is not in adding to our situation so that they fill the large heart of our desires, but rather in the shrinking of our heart's desires to fit our meagre circumstances.

Mystery 3. 'The Christian comes to contentment, not so much by getting rid of the burden that is on him, as by adding another burden to himself.'⁴ Burroughs writes, 'The way of contentment is to add another burden, that is, to labour to load and burden your heart with your sin; the heavier the burden of your sin is to your heart, the lighter will the burden of your affliction be to your heart, and so you shall come to contentment.'⁵

Mystery 4. It is not the removing of the affliction but the metamorphosing of the affliction that brings contentment. The sinners hard heart chaffs under difficulty and can see no way to happiness unless the trial is removed. However, the Christian is able to accept the trial when it is changed into something that produces good in us. Ambrose put it like this, 'Even poverty itself is riches to holy men.'⁶

Mystery 5. 'A Christian comes to contentment not by making up the wants of his circumstances, but by the performance of the work of his circumstances.'⁷ A Christian is to fill their minds with the question of what God wants, not the temptations of the green grass of their whims. The 'if only' thinking must be replaced with 'Thy will be done.'

Mystery 6. Contentment comes not from having our own will but the melting of our will into God's. This is not simply submitting to God's will, but the wanting of God's will. This attitude is revealed when you would choose the same life the Lord has led you knowing that the Shepherd has chosen it, even with all off its pains.

If we fail to think in this fashion we will fail to find the joy, the boasting and the exultation that Paul is singing about.

The reasons for suffering

3 Ibid., p45.

4 Ibid., p47.

5 Ibid., p47.

6 Ibid., p49.

7 Ibid., p51.

As we look at this verse we are naturally brought to the question, 'why do we suffer?' Christianity alone has the truth in answer to this question. Let me quickly map out 7 reasons why we suffer.

Firstly, cause and effect. God has made the universe that we are presently inhabiting in the bodies that we presently have to respond and interact with our given environment in such a way that we experience pain. God created the nervous system with all of the very sensitive nerves that send out signals that what we are doing is dangerous, harmful, damaging, and we are to listen to this message and cease our activity. For example, putting one's hand in a flame. Pain from this perspective is a blessing and to be seen as a gift of God's goodness to us. Likewise if you jump off a cliff gravity will pull you down and you will do serious damage to yourself. God in His wisdom has created our present experience to include pain. When we look at Revelation 21:4 we see that in the New heavens and earth there will be no more pain, whether this is the pain caused by sin or that we will have no nerve responses to pain and will no longer be at the mercy of cause and effect will have to be revealed by God on the last day.

Secondly, the Fall. We know that Adam and Eve plunged the world into the curse of God's law bringing us under many difficulties that include pain, sin and disease. As a result everyone now suffers, there is no life that is free from suffering. Not even Christ Himself because He took on a weak body in the likeness of our sinful flesh was exempt from the pains of this life. He would have felt the pain of His circumcision when He was 8 days old, if He fell over He would have bled, we see evidence of this on the cross. This puts to bed any nonsense that holy people will be exempt from pain altogether in this life. On one level pain is inevitable and suffering is part and parcel of life after the fall, no matter who you are.

Thirdly, divine acts of judgement. God also inflicts suffering in acts of divine punishment for sin. In other words He dishes out a foretaste of final realities. Sometimes it is because sinners have gone too far and God punishes them, for example the Flood. Or perhaps, God sends a small token of judgement to wake the sinner out of their slumber so that they might repent and turn to Him. Either way the Bible is very clear that God does at times intervene in judgement. This has taken the form of natural catastrophes, wars, sickness, demonic possession, etc.

Fourthly, we also see God acting as a Father who disciplines His children. We see this in the life of David after his affair with Bathsheba. This was not an act of judgement as an act of wrath but rather an act of covenant faithfulness to one of His children.

Fifthly, there is suffering that occurs as part of the spiritual war between God and the devil. We can see that Job was caught in the middle of this war and how his suffering and faith were used as a testimony to the devil and the angels of the worth of God.

Sixthly, we have all heard the phrase that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church, well sometimes God allows His people to suffer as a testimony and a means to draw people to Himself. Paul puts it like this, 'For we who live are always being given over to

death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. 12 So death is at work in us, but life in you.' (2 Corinthians 4:11-12).

Seventhly, God uses suffering to perfect us, for our holiness and this is what Paul is talking about in Romans 5:3-4. James says the same thing, 'Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.' (James 1:2-4). And so does Peter, 'In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, 7 so that the tested genuineness of your faith---more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire---may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.' (1 Peter 1:6-7).

And I am sure that we could list many other purposes that God has in pain and suffering. If you come to me and ask me, 'What is God doing in my life?' Here is the answer I would give you, 'I don't know!' All I know is that God is in control, that He has a purpose, this is sufficiently demonstrated in the examples just mentioned, and that it is our place to trust in Him when we don't understand exactly what He is doing. Although we don't know what His exact plan is for us we do know that it is perfect, good, wise, certain, and for His glory so our contentment comes not from understanding every detail and having every question answered but in our knowledge of His character and ways.

The benefits of suffering

So returning to the kernel of Paul's thought, we are able to boast in our trials and not be ashamed of them or our God because we know that God is working the good of our holiness through them. Paul puts it like this, 'we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.' The happiness we derive from suffering is from the benefits it brings, benefits that only Christians can truly have. Although an unbeliever may experience a similar benefit to the Christian you will appreciate that the nature of what is derived is very different. The unbeliever after all cannot be conformed into the character of Christ because they are not first born again, and they certainly cannot have the same hope as us since they have not yet been justified. So in approaching this sequence of effects we need to be clear that this is no natural outcome of suffering for everyone but for believers in particular, and the very reason why we are able to rejoice.

Firstly, notice that suffering produces endurance. Now it is not true that suffering automatically produces endurance, it will only do so if we apply ourselves in obedience to God in the midst of our sufferings. If we are constantly complaining, not praying, not attempting to set our minds on heavenly things we can well understand that suffering will only produce bitterness but not endurance. Endurance is the ability to see a thing through. In particular it is the ability to see difficult things through. Young men tend to be good sprinters, but older men tend to be better long distance runners, this is due in part to a strength of mind that comes with experience. Endurance then is like a muscle. New muscle

is developed when we flood the muscle tissue with blood and burst the blood vessels producing new muscle, it is painful and needs hard work and determination, and suffering acts as a gymnasium for the soul, an opportunity to not quit but see a difficult time through in faithfulness. Suffering then is like the daily routine of a marathon runner who gets up every morning while it is still dark to go and run the 40 kilometres in preparation for a big run. Paul is familiar with the athlete and training and uses this picture in other places as well.

Secondly, notice that endurance produces character. How is this done? Well you endure through difficulties persistently enough it will become easier and a character trait. Think of it in terms of the opposite. Think of sin and how it develops. Sin begins with a thought, a thought indulged leads to an act, an act committed leads to another act, repeated actions lead to a habit, habits become a lifestyle and lifestyle become dispositions where sin has institutionalised you. Likewise a lifestyle of saying no to sin, of being faithful under pressure creates a person who is characterised by endurance.

Thirdly, character produces hope. Character can produce hope in two ways. Firstly, it is well trained in looking through difficulty to the final reward, it is well trained and experienced and so knows the end reward beyond the difficulty. As the puritans said, 'we may be eating a hard breakfast but we are in for a good dinner.' However, there is another way in which growth in character breeds hope. As we are witness to the real change that God brings about by His Spirit we are assured of the final perfecting of the work that He has already begun. In other words as we observe the growth God causes in us knowing that it is not us but the grace of God that works in us we have confidence that God will finally glorify us. Sanctification is a guarantee of glorification.

Friends this is one of the benefits of our salvation, our pains have been turned into something God uses to work his purposes out in our lives. Are you rejoicing in your sufferings, knowing that they are in your Father's hand as a refiner's tool; knowing that you are being perfected and caused to bear the image of Christ; knowing that the final reward when it arrives will so overshadow the pain that you will say with Paul, 'For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.' Are you living by faith or by sense, have you learned the mysteries of contentment. This is part of the Father's bounty to us, not only that we have joy because of what lies at the end of the journey, but joy in the journey as well.