

Sermon 71: Romans 8:17b: The fellowship of Christ's sufferings

OUTLINE

The necessity of our suffering

The nature of our suffering

The end of our suffering

INTRODUCTION

In today's Christianity where we have titles of Christian books like, 'Your Best Life Now,' there is little or no place for suffering. The underlying assumption is that if you are a King's Kid then you should be rich, healthy, successful, and happy. This materialistic picture of Christianity where is all is well is the farthest thing from the Christian life that Paul describes in Romans 8:17. Paul has been telling us about the assurance of our salvation by reflecting on the fact that we are children of God. Because we have the Spirit of Adoption we are children of God, we have the inner working of the Spirit helping relate to God as Father, the inward testimony of adoption. And because we are children we also receive an inheritance. Well, the our portion as children does not end there, Paul tells us in 8:17b that suffering is the part of every child of God's life. '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.'

How does this sound to you; that part of our portion as God's children is suffering? Most today would say that if we suffer it proves that we are not children of God because we are supposed to be happy and successful because we have God in our corner. Some would think that an almighty and loving Father would keep His children from suffering but Paul tells us that suffering is part of our portion if we are indeed His children.

Today as we consider suffering as children of God Paul directs us to think of those things that we suffer 'with Him'. In other words, we are focusing on those sufferings that are specific to Christians because they are united with Christ, not general human suffering because we live in a fallen world. Paul does speak about suffering in general in v18 and following but here we are speaking about participating in Christ's sufferings. We will consider three aspects of having fellowship with Christ's sufferings, firstly, the necessity of suffering, secondly, the nature of our suffering, thirdly, the end of our suffering.

The necessity of our suffering

You will notice as we look at verse 17 that the second part of the verse adds a conditional clause, 'provided we suffer'. Giving us the sense that we will only be heirs with Christ 'provided we suffer.' This conditional language can cause some confusion because read one way it seems to say, 'you will only get into heaven if you suffer.' So right up front we need to reject this direction. Paul is not saying that we finally earn by inheritance by suffering. Paul is not advocating a type of penance teaching where we earn by suffering. He is not

saying that we need to go through a purgatorial trial in order to merit our inheritance. No, we are justified by faith not justified by pain.

In what way then is suffering necessary for us to our inheritance? Suffering is the necessary way *of* life for every Christian, not the necessary way *to* life for the Christian. It is the road we walk to heaven not the price we pay to get in. Christ paid the price for us to get in, but the road there is one of following Christ. Every true believer because he/she walks in the footsteps of the Master will be a target for the devil and so suffer for their identification with Christ. There are those who claim to be Christians but as soon as the persecution begins they falter and the true condition of their hearts is exposed by their falling away. This is the teaching of Christ in the parable of the sower. The seed that was sown in stony ground grew up quickly, and it looked like the real deal, but when the sun came out and it cost something to follow Christ, they abandoned the faith; the fear of man not the fear of God being the basic foundation of their lives. The true children of God are seen by their commitment to walk this path of suffering. The true Christian does not only follow Christ when things go well, but also when the world is against them.

Suffering then is a basic part of the Christian life and every child of God should expect it. Here are three basic ways in which suffering is the necessary part of every Christian's life.

Jesus Himself warned us of the life of suffering that makes up the life of a disciple, John 15:18-20, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. 19 If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. 20 Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.' It is this perspective on the Christian life which explains the whole book of Revelation. If only we would see that our portion in this life is like that of Christ to serve faithfully through sacrifice and triumph not in war but in death and faithfulness witness.

Philippians 1:28-29, 'Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, 28 and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. 29 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, 30 engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.' Here we see that suffering as a Christian is a grant, a gift. Suffering is a privilege for Christian. It is not too much for us to be identified and share in His shame when He was willing to be identified with us and share in our shame. Paul also indicates that is a 'clear sign' of our salvation, for it sets us apart as Christ's, and for this reason Jesus tells us to rejoice in this form of suffering, Matt. 5:10-12, "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.'

In 2 Timothy 3:10-12 Paul says, 'You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, 11 my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra---which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me. 12 Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.' If we imitate Paul as he imitated Christ we too will share in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings with Him.

This was the message of both Christ and the apostles when they planted churches in Acts. In Matt 16:24-25 Jesus warns those who want to become His disciples that they will have to take up crosses of execution, that they should expect that following Him will be the end of their own lives, 'Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 25 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.' And listen to the message of encouragement that Paul and Barnabas gave to the young churches they had just planted, Acts 14:21-22, 'When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, 22 strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.'

We do not face martyrdom, but we do face being seen as dogmatic and intolerant. We are hated because we refuse to acknowledge homosexual marriage. We are ignored, marginalised, mocked and denied a voice in the public square or an opportunity to answer the false science and historical discoveries broadcast to undermine our faith. All other religions except Christianity get a hearing in the schools. It is our duty to be faithful, to refuse to back down or water down our teachings. Our call to faithfulness might not include carrying a cross but it could include not budging on homosexual marriage, not attending homosexual weddings of family and friends. For young people it will include losing friends who don't think Christianity is cool enough. It will include not participating in many activities that include drugs, drink, sex, rebellion and other ungodly activity. This is the road of suffering we must walk, that every true Christian will walk, and those who refuse are like those in the parable of the sower who turned away.

Secondly, suffering is the lot of every child of God because God is a good Father who is faithful to us. Sin is so engrained in us that only the strongest medicines and radical procedures are good enough to help us overcome our sinfulness. The author of Hebrews when encouraging the Jewish Christians to stay faithful to Christ even though they are suffering persecution reminds them that the difficulty they are facing is in God's hand who is using as a Father for discipline to train them in godliness, Hebrews 12:5-11, 'And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?

"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor be weary when reproved by him.

⁶ For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives."

⁷ It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? 8 If you are left without discipline, in which all

have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. 9 Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? 10 For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. 11 For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.'

Pain is the pressure put upon coal that produces a diamond. You are the black coal, God allows and applies the pressure through suffering and the diamond of godliness is the result. And the pain of suffering by God's hand for holiness is proof of His Fatherliness towards you as His children. In our day and age where outward success is the test of blessing and favour we desperately need to stress that being children of God makes suffering necessary. If you suffer as a child of God this does not mean that God does not love, but rather that He does love you.

The nature of our suffering

We have been looking at some of the *why* of Christian suffering, and now we need to look into the *what* of our suffering. As we look into the nature of our sufferings we are confronted with a wonderful mystery. You will notice that Paul says in Romans 8:17, 'provided we suffer *with Him*.' What does Paul mean when he says, 'with Him'? If Paul had said that we 'suffer for Him' we would have no trouble for there are plenty of verses that talk about suffering for His name's sake, e.g. Matt. 5:11; but what could he mean by 'with Him'?

Let's begin with what it cannot mean. It cannot mean that we share in Christ's suffering for the removal of the guilt of our sins. We know that Christ came to die and offer up His life as a ransom for sin, that He was the propitiating sacrifice that removes God's wrath towards our sins. He alone could do this for the sacrifice for sin needed to be blameless and we are all sinners. Christ alone could suffer for our sins by dying on the cross, therefore Paul is not referring to some joint suffering on the cross for our sins. There is a false teaching that sees Mary as a co-Redemptrix who suffered when she watched her Son die, and that her suffering of loss can also be offered as a payment for sin. This is ludicrous and nothing near what Paul means here. This is also why the doctrine of purgatory is a gross error. We can never pay for our sins, we do not suffer for their forgiveness. Christ's death was sufficient payment that we need not try and offer any suffering in addition to what Christ has done. Human suffering does not remove the guilt of sin. There will be sinners suffering for eternity in hell and they will not by their sufferings ever cleanse themselves of one sin and escape.

No the mystery of 'with Him' lies in Paul's own conversion experience. Remember when Paul was confronted on the Damascus road in Acts 9, Christ said to him, 'And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"' Christ identified the suffering of the church with Himself, he told Paul that the persecutions against the church were done against Jesus Himself as the head of the body as well. Jesus teaches

this truth in the parable of the sheep and the goats and reveals that the good or bad deeds done to even the least of the church was done to Him, Matt. 25:40, 'And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'

This is not just a figure of speech or hyperbolic speech, we are mystically united to Christ so that He is the head and we are the body, Eph. 2:22-23, 'And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, 23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.' It is this union that ensures that all that has happened to our head has happened to us. He has died and has resurrected, and so have we. And likewise when we suffer it is His body that suffers. I am not implying some weird view that makes Christ cringe every time we stub our toes, but rather a unity that makes our sufferings His. So then as we go out into this world and preach the Gospel we are an extension of Jesus doing it. In fact Paul talks about his own ministerial sufferings as further sufferings of Christ for the church, Col. 1:24, 'Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.' There is nothing lacking in Christ's sufferings when it comes to the issue of paying for our sins, but there is still much suffering on the part of Christ's body as we take the message of the Gospel into hostile territory and are persecuted and killed as we go. Paul sees his own suffering for the preaching of the Gospel to bring in the church as Christ's sufferings. In 2 Timothy 2:10 he puts it this way, 'Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.' Paul views his ongoing gospel ministry, as painful as it often was, as the necessary means by which God was calling His elect to Himself. There is no suffering that is too great done in service to the church because it is Christ serving His church through us, and He would not count any task too much.

Paul counts this to be one of the greatest things in the Christian life, listen to the things that he treasures above all else in Phil. 3:8-11, 'Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith--- 10 that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.' In amongst the list of 'the righteousness from God,' 'that I may know Him,' and 'the power of His resurrection,' we find this precious phrase, 'and may share His sufferings.' We can easily understand the desire to have God's gift of imputed righteousness, and to know Jesus face to face, and to know freedom from this life in resurrection, but can you put this on your bucket list, on your list of the things you value more highly than anything else in life? Do you count those things suffered in the cause of the gospel as of highest value? Do you see your suffering for the church and its health as the highest privilege and form of service you can render here on earth? When Paul said, 'to live is Christ,' he meant, 'to live is to serve the church like Christ.' We have been reminded of Christ's servanthood this last week as we have been taken through Philippians, here again we are confronted with the call

to enter into a life for others like Christ lived, being willing to suffer, and counting it the highest honour to serve where Jesus has served, knowing we can never do enough in service for the church which He was willing to die for.

It is this life that God blesses to being about blessing for others, for unless the seed first dies it cannot bear fruit, listen to how Paul puts it in 2 Cor 4:8-12, 'We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10 always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. 11 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.' We partake in His sufferings but we also get the joy of seeing life for others flow as well.

We are not without comfort in our sufferings with Christ. The scriptures tell us that we experience God's blessing in a peculiar way when we suffer with Christ, 1 Peter 4:12-14, '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. 13 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.' Paul tells us that we share in God's comforts if we are afflicted, 1 Cor. 1:5, 'For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.' We can be assured that we have Christ with us in our participation in His sufferings.

So will you enter into His sufferings, live a life of living for others, live a life of faithfulness in declaring the truth even if it means death and persecution? We need to be reminded that this is the life, the life of a soldier and servant that we are called to.

The end of our sufferings

This brings us to the last part of the verse, 'in order that we may also be glorified with Him.' Once again we need to stress that the conditional language is not suggesting that we buy our inheritance with our suffering, but rather that the path to heaven is one of suffering and only by the path of faithful service to Christ in a world that is hostile to Christ does anyone get to heaven. But Paul reminds us how it ends. The suffering does not merely come to an end but it ends in glory. It ends with seeing His face, it ends with rest, it ends with joy and the best life then. Our present sufferings contributing to greater rewards in glory, 2 Cor. 4:17, 'For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.' We will say more on this next week.

So then, if you are a child of God, you are called to a life of suffering, don't allow yourself to be misled by modern notions of success and happiness and true spirituality, our path is the way of the cross. We live to serve and suffer that others might live, imitating Christ. Have you grown soft, sought comfort and forgotten the reality of suffering and handed yourself over to doubt? 1 Peter 5:6-11, 'Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of

God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, 7 casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. 8 Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. 9 Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. 10 And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. 11 To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.'