

Christian Suffering

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[0 : 00] Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 8, verse 17. Romans, chapter 8, verse 17. Now if we are children, then we are heirs, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ.

If indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worthy to be compared with the glory that will be revealed in us.

One of the most perceptive and stimulating commentators on the 20th century religious scene was A.W. Tozer, an American minister who died in 1963 and who has left a legacy of a considerable number of books.

In one of these he wrote these words, In these times, religion has become jolly good fun, right here in the present world. And what's the hurry about heaven anyway?

Christianity, contrary to what some have thought, is another and higher form of entertainment.

Christ has done all the suffering. He has shed all the tears and carried all the crosses.

[1 : 15] We have that to enjoy the benefits of his heartbreak in the form of religious pleasures, muddled after the world that carried on in the name of Jesus.

What Tozer says is surely correct. Suffering is the missing note in 20th century Western Christianity.

And yet, Paul tells us here that if we do not share in Christ's sufferings, we will not share in his glory.

This is in line with the teaching of our Lord himself. Do you remember how he called the crowd to him on one occasion along with his disciples and said, If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

For whosoever wants to save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?

[2 : 25] Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory.

O the holy angels. Jesus says that if we follow him, we must deny ourselves, we must leave ourselves behind, leave self behind, take up our cross.

And yet, this is an emphasis which is distinctly muted in Christianity as it is expressed today.

We might ask why. Why is this New Testament emphasis on suffering played down and all but eliminated today? And I think the answer lies in realizing that humanism has influenced the church and influenced the presentation of the gospel.

According to contemporary humanism, the purpose of life is to be happy. And happiness is defined as freedom from pain and trouble.

[3 : 39] Peace at any price is the way Francis Schaeffer would define it. People want peace and affluence at any price. They want to be left alone.

They don't want to be disturbed. That is the humanist idea of the be-all and the end-all of life. And this has so infiltrated into the church that this dimension of suffering, this dimension of cross-bearing, this dimension of leaving self behind, has all but disappeared from contemporary evangelical Christianity.

With the result that the Christian faith has become almost a form of entertainment. It is seen to be an instrument to help to make people feel good.

And if people don't feel good, then they feel religion has failed. Examples of this abound. We think, for example, of the overemphasis today on singing in worship.

As you are aware, at the end of next month, I hope to be abroad in Thailand and in India on behalf of the Bible Society.

[4 : 56] And during my absence, the pulpit here will be occupied by the Reverend William McKnight, who has recently left the Baptist Church and joined the Free Church.

One of the reasons he has done this is that in the particular Baptist Church, in which he was the minister, he was being forced by his congregation to entertain, or to allow people to entertain. The emphasis was being taken away from the preaching and put on the singing. Now obviously there must be singing. Praise is a part of the worship. That praise was becoming entertainment. And this is one of the reasons why he felt he could no longer continue in that church and in that denomination. Again, there is an overemphasis today on celebration.

In one of the parishes in downtown Glasgow not so long ago on Pan Sunday, a celebration was held, a procession with a donkey, right through the community.

[6 : 00] And the minister felt that this was the way forward. Not to come to church, not to have a church service of worship, not to preach about sin and about salvation, but to go in among the people and have a celebration.

This is an emphasis today, entertainment. At the youth assembly held last May in Edinburgh, the climax of the evening was a deluge of paper airplanes upon the assembly.

And this was seen as the essence of religious expression today. And if one goes down to England, one frequently finds in Anglican and in other churches dancing as an element in worship.

An overemphasis on celebration. Obviously there must be celebration. Obviously there must be joy and rejoicing in worship. But the element of suffering, the element of cross-bearing, has disappeared.

One sees it again in the overemphasis today in certain quarters on the charismatic gifts of the Spirit. Gifts which are sought for their own sake. Gifts which are sought to be enjoyed.

[7 : 15] And they are sought in much the same way as a non-Christian youngster might seek a trip on drugs. And it may be significant.

And surely it is a serious criticism of the charismatic movement as it is of the evangelical churches at large. That suffering, cross-bearing, is scarcely mentioned.

This is not the New Testament picture. Paul tells the Philippians, and he tells us through them, it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him. When Paul and Barnabas concluded their first missionary journey, they came back, visited the churches, and exhorted and encouraged the believers. And they said, we must through much tribulation and much hardship enter the kingdom of God.

The way of Christ is the way of a cross. The way of Christ is the way of tribulation, the way of hardship. And this surely is not surprising because the way of salvation is through faith in Christ and being united to him.

[8 : 31] And the Christ to whom we are united is the Christ who suffered upon the cross. The one who was rejected, despised and rejected by men. And therefore, if we are truly to be united to him, we must be prepared to be despised and rejected also along with him.

We must be willing to share the fellowship of his suffering. It is the way the master went, wrote the hymn writer, should not the servant tread it still.

Now when Paul speaks here about suffering, he's not thinking of suffering in general. He's not thinking of toothache or a sore back or a sore head. He's not thinking of suffering in general. He's thinking of distinctively Christian suffering. Of suffering as a consequence of becoming and being a Christian. There are three kinds of Christian suffering.

First of all, there is spiritual contrition. When Jesus told his disciples that the Holy Spirit would come, he said that he would convict the world of the guilt concerning, of guilt concerning sin, righteousness and judgment to come.

[9 : 54] And the Holy Spirit of God convicts men and women of guilt. And when you're convicted of guilt before a holy God, you don't feel good. You feel horrible.

You feel miserable. You see yourself as a sinner. You see yourself as under the wrath and judgment of God. You see yourself as condemned before God by the broken law of God.

Contrition. Contrition can be a painful experience. So painful that many people do not want to face up to it. They prefer to run away. Saul of Christ, you remember, was kicking against the goad.

One of the features of religious revivals down through the years is that there is a deep sense of conviction of sin. And this is a painful experience.

And it is part of the suffering. Part of coming to terms with the bearing the cross, with the bearing Christ's cross.

[11 : 06] The second kind of Christian suffering is what we might call self-renunciation. If we follow Christ, then we must deny ourselves. Not only bear a cross, but deny ourselves.

And we see reference to this in verse 13 of this very chapter. But if you live, says Paul, according to the sinful nature, you will die. But if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.

A Christian is someone who is called to put to death the misdeeds, his misdeeds. And this is a painful experience. It is painful to put to death sinful activities, sinful actions, sinful attitudes. If you are going to follow Christ, you will be called into conflict. You will be called to battle. You will be called to be a soldier. You will be called to battle against sin within you.

as well as around you. Paul explains in the previous chapter something of what this inner conflict means. In verse 21 he tells us, So I find this law at work when I want to do good.

[12 : 12] Evil is right there with me. He's got this conflict with evil. With his old sinful nature it's still there. There is this conflict and he must renounce it.

He must say no to it. He must die daily to self. And this is a painful experience. It is a painful thing to die. Few Christians are called to be martyrs and yet all Christians are called to live with a martyr spirit.

One of the great revivals of the last century took place in the town of Kosaith not very far away from here. And the man who was used in that revival was the Reverend William Burns.

And in his diary he wrote on one occasion Oh that I had a martyr's heart if not a martyr's death and a martyr's crown. And surely that is what is missing today a desire to have a martyr's heart.

A willingness to die to self. A willingness to put to death the misdeeds of the body. A willingness to follow Christ in the sense of self-renunciation.

[13 : 29] And the third kind of Christian suffering is what we might call social opposition. Not only spiritual contrition and self-renunciation but social opposition.

We sometimes call it persecution when it takes a strong form. But it need not go the length of persecution to be there. In this world said Jesus to his disciples you will have trouble but take heart I have overcome the world.

Again if the world hates you keep in mind that it hated me first. Everyone said Paul to Timothy everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

And this is something which is being proved today in Iran in Russia quite dramatically. But truly it is something which is also being proved in Scotland today because you and I know very well that in certain places in certain neighbourhoods in certain perhaps at our work certain offices certain factories to stand up for Christ is the court opposition perhaps not a punch up but nevertheless opposition name calling jeering mockery suffering for Christ and so therefore it is easier for us to avoid it by keeping quiet.

I remember some years ago when there was a system of the factory chaplaincy in the town and the factory in which I was associated I used to go into once a week and speak to the men and to the women in the canteen and there was a table full of men and there was a talk and a chat and then the bell went and they all went away but one stayed and very quietly he said to me that he was a Christian he was a member of a church and another not in Cumbernault but elsewhere he wasn't prepared to see it when the men were there why?

[15 : 43] because he was afraid understandably afraid we must be prepared to stand up we must be prepared to bear the reproach of Christ we must be prepared to bear his cross in our society today because it is unavoidable unless we're going to go underground unless we're going to be ineffective it is unavoidable the world in which we live is the world which crucified him and therefore it is the world which is going to oppose you if you're going to be his disciple and we must be prepared therefore to suffer we must be prepared to suffer for his sake and so you see suffering is built into Christian experience in the form of spiritual contrition self-renunciation and social opposition how then are we to face suffering in this epistle to the

Romans Paul says three things about Christian suffering first of all he says it is inescapable verse 17 is rendered in the Revised Standard Version as follows and of 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 heirs with Christ provided we suffer with him here let me repeat what Paul and Barnabas told

these young converts from their first missionary journey we must through much hardship they said enter the kingdom of God and Paul himself writing to Timothy and of the gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher that is why I am suffering as I am everyone who wants to live a godly life in

Christ Jesus will be persecuted the problem in the church today is that we all want the crown and none of us want the cross but what Paul is saying here is that you cannot have the crown without also having the cross suffering is inescapable we live in a sinful world we have sinful hearts suffering is inescapable Jesus himself has warned us Jesus himself has told us if any man will come after me he must deny himself take up his cross and follow me and so therefore we should not be surprised if we have to suffer we should not be shaken by suffering we should not allow ourselves to become embittered by it because it's clearly there in the terms of Christian discipleship and the conditions of following Jesus

Christ there is no way you can avoid this if you're going to be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ then you're going to have to suffer suffering is inescapable the second point that Paul makes here is that suffering is superable although it cannot be avoided it can be overcome he tells us how in the 18th verse I consider he says that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us these sufferings painful difficult as they are when seen against the background of the glory that is the inheritance of Christian people are not worth comparing with the greatness of that glory the word that Paul uses suggest the idea of a pair of scales and he puts on the one side his sufferings and when he puts these sufferings on the scales that side goes down because Paul's sufferings were great and then he takes his eyes away from the sufferings and he looks at the glory that he will receive at the glory into which he will enter the glory which our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ has already entered into and he places that on the other scale and that scale goes way down and the sufferings go way up and so the sufferings which seem to be so painful which seem to be so burdensome and so heavy now become appear to be as light as a feather when he puts them in contrast with the glory that is to come the glory that will be revealed in us who are in Christ Jesus and so suffering is super as super as super as as as you remember had difficulty with many of the injustices in the society of his day he looked about in psalm 73 and he saw that the people who were flourishing were the crooks and the violent men the wicked are carefree they increase in wealth surely he said surely in vain

[21 : 28] I have kept my heart pure in vain I washed my heart my hands in innocence here am I seeking to live a good life here am I seeking to follow the Lord and look the men who turn their back upon the Lord the people who follow a godless life are the ones who are best off the ones who have least worried but when he went into the house of God he saw things differently then I tried to understand all this that was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God then I understood the final destiny then he saw the background then he saw the whole situation against the back loss of eternity and then he realized that he was far better off than they because he had the gift of salvation because he had that gift which would endure because he had the assurance of glory and all they had in the life after death was a fearful looking forward to judgment and so suffering becomes superable when by the grace of

God we know that we share we will one day share the glory of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ the one who is already ascended to the Father's right hand who is already glorified because of our faith union with him we who believe shall be glorified with him when we die so Paul is saying here you cannot be glorified with Christ then if you are unwilling to suffer with him now conversely if you do suffer with him now you will be glorified with him then such a privilege far outweighs the pain the burden the problems of suffering for Christ here this is why Moses was willing to suffer as he did the righteous to the Hebrews tells us that he regarded this grace for the sake of

Christ as of greater value than the treasure of Egypt because he was looking ahead to his reward and that's what Christian people must learn constantly to do to look ahead to their reward the man of the world the woman of the world live for this life only they live for tomorrow they live for next week they live for next year and no further and that is all but a Christian man a Christian woman must learn to live and look for his reward live for eternity and have the perspective of eternity always and when you have the perspective of eternity and realize the greatness of the glory into which you will enter through Christ then suffer your sufferings however great they may be will become as a feather I reckon says Paul I consider I have worked out I have concluded he said I have weighed these things up and

I have come to the conclusion that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us Paul suffered far more than you or I have suffered or are ever likely to suffer and yet he could say this I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us suffering for a Christian is superable because of this vision because of this promise because of this assurance but the third thing that Paul says in this epistle about Christian suffering is that it is serviceable Christian suffering is not a waste Christian suffering in the providence of God plays a productive role in Christian experience remember what Paul says in chapter 5 at verse 3 we rejoice in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance perseverance character and character hope the

New English Bible renders that third verse as follows we exult in our present sufferings because we know that suffering trains us to endure and endurance brings proof that we have stood the test and this proof is the ground of our hope in other words what Paul is saying here is that suffering demonstrates the genuineness of our faith it demonstrates the genuineness of our faith and so Paul says we rejoice because through the experience of suffering we come into a deeper understanding of Christ through our experience of suffering our faith is deepened and strengthened therefore he says we rejoice this is why James in his epistle said consider it pure joy my brothers when you face trials of many kinds and this is surely the reason why if you were to go today to the churches of eastern

[27 : 13] Europe you would find a far warmer atmosphere you would find a far higher spiritual temperature you would find a far deeper Christian commitment than you find in the churches of Scotland and of the western world because Christians there have to suffer and their suffering has demonstrated the genuineness of their faith it has purified their faith it has cleansed their faith suffering is serviceable and so Paul tells us these three things about Christian suffering that it is inescapable it is superable and it is serviceable I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us I wonder how much time we spend thinking about the glory that is to come how much time do we spend looking towards that end that Moses looked towards that reward all too often I fear we have allowed ourselves to become limited and narrow minded as our age is narrow minded and we live like a horse with blinkers and we do not see eternity we see only time now if you are going to live as a Christian and if I am going to live as a Christian then we cannot live effectively unless these blinkers come off and unless we see the reward unless we see the end unless we see the eternal dimension of our existence and it is then that we will live as

Christ lived because he lived looking forward to that reward he lived looking forward to the glory which would follow his suffering it is only when we recapture this vision of glory and that we will be able to cope with suffering and to face it in the meantime because we lack the vision we duck the suffering and we opt for an easy option a superficiality a form of Christianity that cuts little ice and that has little effect in our society and so as we live day by day let us with the apostle Paul seek to reckon to consider to come to a conclusion about these matters one man who suffered a great deal for his faith was

John Calvin salvation and when he died his head in the arms of his colleague Biza he tried to repeat this 18th verse of Romans chapter 8 I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us but before he finished that verse he died he passed into that glory I wonder are we prepared to follow Christ today are we prepared to follow him recognising that to follow him will mean bearing a cross it will mean suffering it will mean leaving self behind are we prepared to stand up and be counted for him as he was prepared to stand up on the cross for us until we are we can never be sure we can never be certain that we are his and unless we are we cannot have the hope of eternal life but if we are we can have this hope and we can have this joy this joy which enabled

Paul to say I reckon that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us and that assurance is an assurance which God in his grace and in his mercy is offering to all of us today and he invites us to lay hold upon Christ and to follow him to deny ourselves to pick up our cross and to become his disciples amen amen