

Who Wants Suffering?

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[0 : 00] Now I can tell, I can tell already, that you're not going to like this sermon. I just have a feeling that you're not going to like it, and how do I know that?

Because I know my own heart, and I recoil from the whole reality of it's involved in suffering. None of us like that. You might have guessed by now the theme is the suffering of Paul, or looking at Paul's life and see what we can learn about the Christian life from him through Scripture.

And I think it's fair to admit this morning nobody is interested in suffering, or at least nobody wants suffering in their lives. I think it's fair to say all of us want comfort, and acceptance, and happiness, and belonging.

These are all great things, and it's wonderful, and it's important that that is at the very depth of our heart. None of us want suffering. There's something wrong with us if we want suffering.

Isn't there? That is the reality, and that's absolutely right. But the danger for us, the danger for me as a Christian, and the danger for me as a minister particularly, I think when you're presenting the gospel, is that we try and sell Christianity like we would sell a product.

[1 : 25] We give all the plus points of being Christian all the time, and we want people, and rightly so, we want people to know peace, spiritual peace, and peace with God.

We want people to hear and understand the message of forgiveness, and love, and healing, and eternal life, and all these great things. But our tendency, and our natural bent, is to bury the bad news, is to not talk about suffering for being a Christian.

It's not a great USP, is it? It's not a great unique selling point. Hey, come and become a Christian, and you'll suffer like never before. It's not that attractive. It's not that appealing. So we tend not to say anything.

It's not a pool. It's not something that we would naturally do, either in sharing our faith, or looking at in Christian experience. Can you imagine if you say, become a Christian, come on, become a Christian.

You should become a Christian. It's a great thing, an important thing to be a Christian. Because when you do, people are going to hate you, and you'll be battling internally with yourself, all of the rest of your life, and you'll be opposed by spiritual powers of darkness.

[2 : 38] Come on down, be a Christian. It's not really the way we do things normally, is it? And it's not a natural thing for us to talk about or to discuss.

But we're going to today, so you're not going to like the sermon. But I am going to give you some caveats at the beginning, as we deal with this theme of suffering. Of course, it's not the whole picture in this life for us as Christians.

There is joy and comfort and belonging and love and forgiveness, unparalleled when we come to Christ and when we know Him. There is hope beyond anything else when we are Christians.

I leave that caveat. Also, even in suffering as a Christian, there can be something really good going on.

God can be using the dark realities of our experience for some great purpose. Caveat, Saul's experiences will not be ours.

[3 : 47] We're not Saul. We're not Paul, whether you call them Saul or Paul. Either or. His experiences will not be ours. His sufferings will not be ours. But there will be suffering in your life as a Christian and in my life as a Christian when we are following Jesus.

The last caveat, no, second last caveat, it's temporary. Okay? You will not always need to hear this sermon. In fact, it will be a day when you'll not hear any more sermons at all.

And that will be great. But there is something far better still to come for us as Christians. The suffering in Him is only temporary.

And the last caveat that I bring is I simply don't have all the answers. And especially with regard to why some people suffer more than others.

And why some people don't seem to suffer very much. It's not something you can just give a quick blog answer to on a Monday morning. It's not easy for us to appreciate.

[4 : 54] And I think it's glib and unhelpful to try and suggest that we have all the answers to the sufferings that people go through, individuals particularly. So these are some of the caveats.

But I want to look briefly at Paul and learn from Paul about why we will suffer as Christians. Why it is absolutely indispensable and unavoidable that we will suffer as Christians.

A miserable theme for a sermon. Paul, firstly we see that the hunter became hunted. We read that in the accounts that we read from that.

We went back to passages we've looked at before. And we read that Paul, who was the hunter of Christians, became hunted as a Christian.

So he was breathing out threats and murder against Christians. He had this great venomous hatred for Jesus Christ and for Christians.

[6 : 02] And then we're told, after he meets with Christ on the Damascus Road, that he would suffer many things for the sake of the name of Jesus.

So the hunter becomes hunted. And that really helps to tell us everything about suffering in the Christian life. See, before Paul became a Christian, before Saul became a Christian, he hated Christ.

He hated what Christ stood for. He hated Christ's followers until he met with Christ on that road to Damascus. He was a religious guy.

He was moral. He was upright. And he was successful in his life. He was a really upright, upstanding individual who had an irrational fear of Christ and the Christian message.

He saw it as a real danger to him in his own life, even though he was religious. It was seditious. It was changing people's lives.

[7 : 14] And it was challenging his own personal beliefs, his social standing. And the religious status quo that he was part of in Israel.

And as he heard the teaching of Jesus and was exposed to it, there must have at some point been an exposure of his own heart's rebellion against God, which he hated.

And that drove him to silence Jesus and silence his followers. That was Paul that we're speaking of before he became a Christian.

And it expresses some of the reality of why we suffer as Christians are going to see. Because what happened to him? What happened to this upright, moral, powerful, religious leader who was hell-bent on destroying the fledgling Christian church and denying the teaching of its Savior Jesus Christ?

He met with Jesus. That's what changed him. He met with Jesus and everything in an instant in Paul's life is changed.

[8 : 28] We don't know all what happened. Not all is recorded. But he met with Jesus on the Damascus Road and it changed everything. Remember what he had already heard and seen.

We know that he knew certain things about Jesus and we know that the clothes of Stephen, the first martyr, were laid at his feet. And that he heard the testimony of Stephen about Jesus and he knew the teaching.

And then he met with this Christ. And the Bible would explain that in terms of a rebirth. He was reborn. He put his faith in this Christ that he previously wanted to crush and to destroy.

He repented. He was forgiven. He was baptized. He was filled with the Holy Spirit and he had a new heart which was able to love God and recognize who Jesus was and what Jesus had done.

He had met with the truth. You know, as I think Corey said it here, and it's not Corey's original, it doesn't have any original thoughts, it's all from Keller.

[9 : 34] But he does attribute to Keller certainly. You know, if Christ walked out of the tomb, it changes everything. And that was it, wasn't it?

If Christ walked out of the tomb, it changed everything. And that is exactly what Paul came to recognize was the truth. He met with the truth in Jesus Christ.

He met with Christ. He was reborn. Oh boy. And he suffered. He suffered like never before when he became a Christian.

It's bad news. It's not a good sell for the gospel in this comfortable society in which we live. Because Paul suffered. We read in Acts at the end of chapter 23, the plot to kill him.

There was a substantial group of men that vowed not to eat and drink until they murdered Paul. They now must be very thin, because they didn't quite make that.

[10:36] Them themselves, though they plotted to murder him. He was shipwrecked three times. He was on house arrest for two years, unable to get out to his churches and the people he loved and the evangelism he wanted to do, which we read of at the end of Acts.

And 2 Corinthians 4, 11 speaks about him being in poverty, being beaten, being stoned, being homeless, being mugged. He was opposed within the church. He was opposed outside of the church.

He was hungry. He was thirsty. And he had all the pastoral burdens of the people that he had brought to faith as an apostle.

So that's Paul's experience. He met Christ. He was reborn and he suffered. That is not a good apologetic for coming to faith as a bear apologetic, as it's just left like that.

But we need to unpack it a little bit. What is God teaching us about suffering through Paul's own experiences and through the Bible's teaching? Because he goes on from his life of suffering to teach a great deal by God through the Holy Spirit for our understanding and under the guidance of the Spirit.

[11:53] What is God teaching us about suffering through Paul's experience? Firstly, and there's many things that we'll not have time to look at today, but the reality of sin. The reality of sin makes suffering for us absolutely inevitable.

That's the reality of the world in which we live in. Because of sin in our hearts and in the world, it makes suffering inevitable.

You see what Paul was like before he became a Christian. He was hell bent on destroying Jesus Christ and God because of the challenge that it was made to his own.

He opposed God by nature. Now that is absolutely the same for every single one of us. That sin in our hearts is opposed to God and His grace and His goodness.

Because it exposes our self-righteousness, our independent spirit, our legalism, our rebellion against God, our desire to be lords over our own life.

[12:57] And we hate God's lordship, naturally. That's sinful nature within us. And we don't like the message that there needs to be a change. That there needs to be a denial of ourself.

That there needs to be a falling on our knees before Christ for salvation and hope and for a future. Because it goes against all our natural inclinations to be lords of our own life, to be in control, to do things our way.

And what right is God to say anything to us? Our sinful natures give us that. Welling up within us against the message, the uncomfortable message of sin in the gospel.

We don't like that in our lives, as Paul clearly didn't. And as Christians, that doesn't go away the moment we become Christians.

Paul recognized that in his own battles, internal battles. I'm not speaking about anything outside ourselves at the moment. But that, when we come to Christ, that denial of our sinful selves, that is, may I say, it's a Christian of 35 years or so, or longer, nearly 40 years.

[14:10] That is an ongoing battle. That doesn't get easier. The battle against our own natures, where God encourages us to say no to ungodliness.

You know, there is a point where as believers we have to say no. No to ungodliness. We don't like that, because we love ungodliness. Deep down we love it.

We love all that it gives us, and we love the self-control that allows us to have. And we don't like the self-denying aspect of the gospel. So we struggle with that. We struggle with that all the time.

And we are seeking the transformation in Christ to deal with our sin, to deal with our selfish nature against His grace and against His goodness and against His love.

Not only is that an internal battle, but of course there is the reality that we live in a fallen world, and therefore we'll be suffering within that world that Paul experienced, and we will also, the poverty, the illness, the unemployment, the loss of loved ones, the things we hate, the things that we want to avoid, the things that we curse God for.

[15:18] These are all the reality of living in this world that is broken and out of its rightful relationship with God and with itself.

And also the genesis of evil, the darkness and the powers of darkness, and the spiritual forces of darkness, the devil hates Christ and his followers.

And that brings opposition because of the reality of sin that makes it inevitable. That's why the psalmist, I agree, you know, we go back to the psalmist, in Psalm 73, he envies the fact that, he's envious of the fact that unbelievers seem to have a struggle-free, battle-free life.

He longs to be like them. Can you imagine any other book that is speaking about the importance of truth being open enough to allow this reality to be exposed?

He looks at everyone who isn't a believer and he says, they've got a great life. My life's rubbish, and I'm supposed to be a believer. Why is my life so rubbish? Their life seems so great. The perceived struggle-free life of the unbeliever until he recognizes the truth of God.

[16:41] So the reality of sin makes it inevitable. Second thing is that it's our identity, and it's the first of the slides, I think, for the screen. It's our identity in Christ that I may know him, Paul says this when he's writing to the Philippian church, and the power of his resurrection and may share his sufferings becoming like him in his death.

So there is a fact that being a Christian and identifying as a Christian will mean that we share his sufferings as Christians.

Does that mean well? In the same way that Paul turned from being someone who is against Christ to being a believer because he met with Christ.

So every one of us as Christians can say the same, maybe not in such a dramatic way, but we have met with the living Savior by faith through grace.

We have met with Him, and therefore the gospel, as it changed Paul's heart, is also changing our hearts. And just as Paul had the presence of Christ in him through the Holy Spirit, so you and I have the presence of Christ in us through the Holy Spirit.

[17:56] That makes us offensive. We are not to be offensive, but it makes us offensive.

As we live as Christians, and as we identify with Christ, He was beautiful. He was perfect.

He was gracious. He was respectful. He was gentle, but he was strong. He didn't say bad things about people. He never gossiped.

He didn't speak badly of others in a way that was untrue. He was the perfect human being. But he was rejected, wasn't he?

People didn't love him. He was rejected and opposed and crucified. And we will share that as Christians.

[18:53] We will share that. It's absolutely inevitable. If we are living our lives reflecting Jesus Christ and seeking to follow Jesus Christ, if Christ is our Lord, then we are in a collision course with the world in which we live, as well as with our own hearts, which we recognize.

But in that collision course, grace is to act as the airbag. Please remember that. Grace should always be at work in however we live our lives.

We are going against the normative and the current world view, its morality and its ethics. When Christ speaks about self-denial, when the gospel speaks against the rejection of rampant individualism, when we won't follow the world and our friends into their excesses, when we defend the rights of the voiceless, the poor and the unborn, when we take our stand gently and persuasively and quietly about biblical teaching on sexuality and gender roles, and when we speak of absolute truth or when we share our own moral delinquency before God and say that that is a reality for all of us, when we oppose self-righteousness, when we demand that Christ's message is an exclusive message, when we speak about trusting in a crucified but risen Savior, we will find ourselves in a collision course that we simply can't avoid.

And we have to come in terms with that. There's no other way for us, we will suffer because of our faith in Jesus Christ, because Christ Himself, the great example and the great Redeemer suffered. There is no such thing for us in reality as private faith. It's not simply just about me and my God, quietly, because as we are identified with Christ, we will suffer because of that.

[21:12] Now there are all kinds of caveats and nuances that we need to make in that area, isn't there? We need to recognize the need not to be obnoxious, not to be spluttering forth our understandings and sometimes our misunderstandings about people and their needs, and we need to remember and recognize the great importance of loving everyone that we come alongside.

But it is inevitable that we will suffer because we're in a collision course. But the irony of that is that it both repels and attracts.

When we live for Jesus Christ, when we are gentle and compassionate and humble, but also Christ-like and seeking to be obedient and loyal to Him and His grace and His truth, as we express our own faith, it both repels and attracts.

So what am I saying here? I'm saying here that the church will grow. People will become Christians when we recognize the reality as a Christian church of suffering.

You will make enemies as a Christian. You probably have made enemies and you felt really hurt about it because you've sought to be gentle and compassionate and understanding in what you believe, but you've made enemies.

[22 : 43] But you know what the difference is when we make enemies? As far as it is possible up to us, we live at peace with them. We love them. We serve them. We pray for them.

I have no time for a kind of, and the Bible has no time for a self-righteous separation from those who disagree with us as if somehow we are better than them.

Jesus says, get right in there and love them, even though they may hate us and even though they may be, as it were, our enemies.

It will repel, but we also know that the grace we show as we live that way also attracts because it exposes good news.

It exposes that we are humble and we recognize our delinquency and have come to Jesus Christ and He has changed us, just like Paul was changed from breathing out murderous threats against Christians to being the one who shared lovingly and who gave sacrificially of his life for Jesus Christ.

[23 : 57] It's the huge paradox of the gospel, and we need, and you need, and I need the spiritual metal and the guts to accept both, both the reality of suffering and the power of grace.

It's not an option for us either to recoil into privacy and say, well, I'm just this kind of private, I don't want to offend anyone, I'm just a private Christian, or the insularity, or resorting to judgmental shouting from the sidelines.

Neither are an option for us. We don't have the right to judge other people because God says, look at your own heart. Nor do we have the right to simply go into a cocoon and stay forever private in our faith.

We need to go forward in grace with the good news, recognizing that we are part of the problem and that Christ is the only answer. That is where the church grows.

That is where the church will grow when we are faithful to Jesus Christ and we will stand side by side with Him in His suffering with all humility and with all grace and with all compulsion.

[25 : 15] It's our identity. We don't have another identity. You want another identity? Come on up and preach that. But it's not the identity that we find in Jesus Christ. So we have a choice.

We have a choice either to accept His grace and its beauty and the temporary suffering that we will experience as we follow Jesus Christ.

And as we do so and recognize that, we will see the kingdom come and the church grow in our lives.

And the church grow as people come to faith and are attracted by the simplicity and the strength and the courage and the humility of the way we deal with suffering.

We can choose that or we can choose to be ashamed of Jesus. And that's easy for us to do. I know that. I know that because there are times when I am ashamed to stand up for Jesus Christ.

[26 : 22] Mark 8 verse 38, let Jesus speak in His own words, for whoever is ashamed of Me and of My words in this adulterous and sinful generation of Him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with His Holy Angel.

These are strong words. Are we content just to be ashamed of Jesus? Actually, it's great to be a Christian, but I'm kind of ashamed of Him. Or are we willing to suffer because of our identity and grace and recognizing that it is first a battle in our own hearts?

So lastly and very briefly, we look for suffering and Paul's example of suffering to change our perspective. It changed Paul's perspective of life and of what was important.

It made him reliant on Jesus Christ. 2 Corinthians 4 verse 7, but we have this treasure in Jarser clay to show that this surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

He was probably the greatest Christian, if you can talk in these terms, correct me if I'm wrong, that ever lived, the most effective and powerful. And yet he recognized his weakness and that he was at Jarser clay.

[27 : 37] 2 Corinthians 12 verse 9, but my grace God said to him, my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly my weaknesses, so the power of Christ may rest on me.

His suffering exposed his weakness and yet it was his strength. Again, the further paradox of the gospel, he wasn't self-reliant.

He didn't ride out on a white horse and I'm a Paul the apostle and I'm going to change the world. It wasn't like that. He was humble and weak and not self-reliant.

And he came to recognize that he didn't suffer alone, that he was suffering unlike Christ's suffering, where Christ took the sting and the isolation and the brunt of suffering and didn't have any respite. And Christ took that so that when Paul and when we suffer, we can say we're not crushed. We're not in despair. We're not abandoned. We're not destroyed.

[28 : 44] That's what Paul said in the reading we did together. There was victory for him and presence. The presence of God in the midst of that. His will, he could see that God was doing something in his life, that there was stripping back that sinful self-reliance that is in us all and he was using the suffering to change him and it strips away the dross and the excess in our lives if we are willing to let him do that.

And of course it's the final nail in Satan's coffin because you would think, wouldn't you, at the end of Acts, Paul's, it's a kind of ignominious end of this great second book of Luke where we just have this one couple of verses that say, I knew he was in prison for two years.

And yet in Philippians 1, 12 and 13, Paul says, I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard, the whole of the Roman guard, and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.

So he was imprisoned. It stopped him doing what we thought he was going to be doing, travelling around the world as I mentioned, he was sharing the gospel and yet it was used by, he could see that this clipping of his wings had a great spiritual purpose.

Now I know within that there's great mystery and there's great mystery in our suffering and I please don't think I'm trying to minimize people's suffering, your suffering, the difficulties that people go through.

[30 : 18] I have no answer to many of these things. And we know that nobody likes suffering or persecution. But we also know it's always been the way.

There's never been a comfortable church or comfortable Christians that have known the power of God at renewal, blessing and growth.

It's simply, it's an oxymoronic statement to say that you can be a comfortable Christian and know the blessing and grace and growth of God.

Because just like a plant in the garden, it will only grow effectively and beautifully when it is pruned and fed in the right way.

And if we are wanting to be comfortable Christians who Jesus will rubber back and say, there, there, just have a great old life, then we'll probably stagnate and we'll return to the world and we'll shrink because we will recoil from the light of Jesus shining into the darkness of our own hearts and the suffering but also the healing that it brings.

[31 : 41] And use this story just before I finish. A story that I've used a hundred times but it's a good story. Okay, it's that pain of healing. An old friend of mine had a very serious car accident.

You probably all heard this. I used to visit him in hospital regularly. I was up in Inverness and he was lying out in his bed because he had broken hundreds of bones in his body, especially his legs, couldn't walk.

And then I went and one after months went in one day and he was sitting over the side of the bed. He was up, sitting up. But when I went to see him, he was crying.

I said, why are you crying? What was wrong? He said there's desperate pain in my legs. It was the blood that was flowing back into his legs, having been lying flat for weeks and weeks.

And it was excruciating pain. But it was healing pain. And it was healing suffering for him so that he could walk again in days to come.

[32 : 45] And that's the reality that we face as Christians. None of us look for suffering. None of us go after that. But as we see God at work, we see him bringing healing to us so that we can walk spiritually for him.

It challenges our perspective to be reliant and also to recognize the unseen reality that is now and in the future, Romans 8, 18. I consider Paul says, in all his sufferings, in all that list of sufferings, the present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed.

And 2 Corinthians 4 speaks of just his presence and the light and momentary afflictions. Remind us of the unseen realities that are not transient but are eternal.

So it reminds us that the suffering here is temporary, that we are not alone, and it's important that we see we don't only live once.

That in many ways, this is just the opening chapter. If it's even that, there's something for us far better where suffering will not be, where the tears will be wiped away.

[34 : 04] That's the great hope in our suffering. You sing Negro spirituals and you see and you recognize that that was the ongoing hope of those who were enslaved and going through difficult times, that there was a future hope on that great shore.

And there is simply no comparison to what there will be. Death will not be annihilation, it will not be the end, but for the Christian, the great reality is that the best is still to come.

And the challenge in suffering is not to take our eye off Jesus nor to shake our fists at Him, but to fix our eyes on Him.

So what will it be for us in this sermon that you haven't enjoyed at all? The temptation to give up when the going gets tough?

Did Jesus not walk out of the tomb? What's the alternative? A life of ease now that denies the truth or a life of joy, even in suffering now and eternal and incompatible riches eternally.

[35 : 24] We all need to ask these questions afresh on this lovely summer's morning. Let's bow our heads. Lord God, help us to recognize that you are God, that you don't seek to meet our agenda, nor do you change, but you are love and you are grace, and you have transformed our lives as we have met with you and we've seen you as being worth serving and following.

Forgive us when we are more concerned about ourselves and our comfort than the reality of standing up for Jesus gracefully, humbly, in a self-denied and in a courageous way.

And forgive us for hating our enemies so often rather than loving them. Forgive us for being smart alex with them sometimes trying to win the argument.

Forgive us for ignoring them or rejecting them or denying our role in praying and seeking their good. And help us to learn how to live in such a way that will make us useful in your kingdom and will offer Christ in an honest and genuine way.

[37 : 06] Help us in that and forgive us when we fail you at every turn. And above all, keep us from being ashamed of you because you were not ashamed of us to the very point of crucifixion, hell and dereliction, and in resurrection you've given us life.

We thank you for that. Amen.