

Supremacy of God in Missions Through Suffering
Capitol Hill Baptist Church Missions Class IV
July 01, 2001

Theme: The suffering of God's people, as they carry out His missionary task, is used by God to display His worth as His people demonstrate their willingness to suffer loss in this life for the sake of the Gospel.

Instructional Objective: Lord willing, students will understand that God's ordaining suffering is a part of His plan to clarify His own worth in the sight of all people as His children happily accept the "plundering of their property" because of the better home in His kingdom.

STATE: Last week we considered the question of missions and prayer. We asked the question "Why does God purpose for his work of missions to go forward with prayer?" In response, we determined that God intends his people to call out to him in prayer for the things they need to complete the task he has given them, so that they will get the help that they need in a way that demonstrates the absolute power and sufficiency of God. In short, so that they will get the help and He will get the glory.

But this can't be the whole story. What about those faithful saints who call out to God for help...for deliverance from the hands of evil men...and get no powerful answer. What about the Christians who, presumably, call out to God for help and deliverance, yet die anyway? What about the Christians who don't "get" from God but rather suffer loss as they seek to serve him? What does that say about God?

This is not a hypothetical question. Both history, and maybe even our own experience, shows that there have been hundreds, even thousands, of Christians who have gone out for the sake of the name and know pain, loss, suffering and death. And strangely, for most Christians we probably find that we take some measure of challenge and encouragement from these lives. Particularly from those who have willingly died for the sake of the Gospel.

Martyr Models from the Life of the Church:

1. Henry Martyn

One such example is Henry Martyn. After living several years as a young man in open rebellion toward God, Henry was converted and turned to faithful obedience to Christ. In 180X he left England for India to become a missionary and chaplain. But his life was not easy. For one thing, he was in love with a young lady in England whose mother determined that she would not allow her daughter to marry Henry and move to India. Heartbroken, he continued with his work none the less, faithfully preaching and translating Scripture into local languages. Then, in 1812, his health began to fail and he determined to return to England, through Persia, so he could complete his Persian translation on the way. In October of 1812, he died alone and among strangers in the

town of Tocat, Turkey without ever making it back to England and to the woman he longed to marry. He was 31 years old.

So how did Henry Martyn view his own short and tragic life. Was he bitter and disappointed that God had allowed him to live a life that was both remarkably faithful and remarkably painful. Well, near the very end he wrote this famous passage in his journal.

“Whether life or death be mine, may Christ be magnified in me! If he has work for me to do, I cannot die.” - Henry Martyn

But God seemed to be done with his work for Henry, and so young Martyn died seemingly content with the life he had lead in the hands of a sovereign God.

Do we need Martyr Models?

So why are so many fascinated with the lives of people like Henry Martyn? Is it merely macabre fascination that grips us as we hear stories like these, or is this actually something we should think about in our own Christian discipleship?

- In 1993 about 150,000 Christians martyred (David Barrett).
Certainly this sort of suffering can seem strange and foreign to us in our comfortable and safe lives here in America. But that is not the case for millions of our brothers and sisters around the world. We need martyr models to emulate because suffering is a significant part of our experience as Christians.
- Galatians 5:24... “crucifying the flesh.”
Clearly external suffering is not all that we are warned about. There is the suffering that comes from dying to our own sinful desires. But that is not all the suffering that faithful Christians may encounter in this life.
- John 15:20... “they will persecute you.”
Jesus warns his disciples that just as evil men persecuted him, they will also persecute us.
- 1 Peter 2:20-21... “Christ...an example.”
Christ set an example that we should follow after.

ASK: What example is it that we are told to emulate?

Not Christ’s ethical teaching based on this particular passage, though some have used this passage for that purpose, but rather to say that we should follow after his example in patiently enduring suffering for doing good. We need to consider suffering because we are commanded to follow Christ’s example when we endure the suffering we are promised will come if we faithfully pursue the Gospel.

Prepare for Suffering Now!

- Is suffering normal for Christians?

So that brings us to the inevitable question, “Is this sort of suffering “normal” for Christians?” And is it good for us to spend time thinking about suffering, or will it just make us dull and dark people if we think about this deliberately.

- 1 Peter 4: 1 & 12... “arm yourselves with this thought.”

Peter tells us that thinking about Christ’s suffering, and the likelihood of our own suffering, is something that we should do in order to “arm” ourselves for the Christian life...in order to prepare ourselves for suffering before hand.

- Hebrews 13: 12-14... “go forth with Him outside the camp.”

- Examples of suffering: Sudan, China, CHBC.

Does God Allow or Appoint the Suffering of His Messengers?

So, we have established that suffering is a part of the life of a Christian in a fallen world, that God has told us that we will suffer for the Gospel and so we should prepare ourselves ahead of time for that eventuality. But that still doesn’t get us to the bottom of our initial question “Why?” Why is it that Christians suffer? Well, according to Scripture, part of the answer is that they suffer because God wills it. The Bible does not limit the picture of the saints suffering to God’s permission, but finally it is pictured as an outworking of his sovereign will.

- Acts 4:27 – 28... “what your power and will had decided...”

Here we are told that the greatest suffering in all of history, the suffering of Christ, was not something that God allowed to happen, rather it was something that he decided should happen. God is not a victim, passively allowing suffering, in this case at least he was the all powerful agent, even moving the plans of wicked men to accomplish his good and holy purpose.

But what about us, that may be true for Christ, but is it true for our suffering?

- Philippians 1:29... “it has been given to you...to suffer.”

Throughout Scripture the suffering of God’s people is not presented as some unfortunate corollary to life in a fallen world, that God does not want, but is constrained to permit out of his desire for other things. Rather, here we see that God “gives” or “appoints”

suffering for his people with a positive, God-glorifying purpose in mind...that we would suffer “for Christ.”

- 1 Thessalonians 3:3-4... “we were destined for them.”

Or here we see directly that we were “destined” to suffer. Destined by whom? Well of course by God, the one who moves every even in history according to the purpose of his will. God people will suffer, because he wills that they should suffer...for his name.

Why Does God Appoint Suffering for His Servants?

That brings us to the most difficult “Why” of the morning. Why would a good and loving God appoint, will, purpose and destine his children for suffering? Well, just looking through Scripture I found a number of reasons.

- Deeper faith and greater holiness

2 Corinthians 1: 8-9

First, Scripture is clear that God intends for the suffering of his children to pull them away from the hopes of this world and to help them trust more fully in Christ. Paul expected that his suffering would lead him to rely on God, who is able to raise even the dead.

- To give us greater joy in our reward and the glory of Christ

2 Corinthians 4: 17-18

Our sufferings works for us greater joy in our reward and a greater hope in eternal things rather than the things of this life.

- To wake up other Christians and make them bold

Philippians 1:14

Also, our willingness to suffer for the Gospel encourages others to do the same, so that they are made bold and willing to speak the Word more courageously and fearlessly. Perhaps that is part of why we profit from the stories and examples of other Christians who have suffered for the faith...reading and considering their endurance will help us to endure as well.

- To open the eyes and hearts of the lost.

1 Thessalonians 1: 5-6

Our holy and patient endurance, the way we live out our endurance for the Gospel sake may be used to attract people to the Word and help bring them to repentance. God’s word is powerful, but in his wisdom he has chosen to make the power of his word plain to the lost through our dedication to it, even in suffering.

- Suffering moves Christians to the places He wants them to go

Acts 8:1, Acts 11:19

In both these examples, God reveals how he used the stoning of Stephen and the persecution that followed to carry the Gospel out to Jews throughout the eastern Mediterranean, and then to the Gentiles as well.

But there is one final reason that I think may be most important for us to consider and understand, given the bent of our culture and our hearts. I think that this is the other side of the coin we began to discover last week. Based on Scripture it seems plain that the reason that God ordains, wills, appoints and destines his people to suffer is because their suffering glorifies the worth of the Gospel of Christ.

- Suffering magnifies the power and worth of Christ

Matthew 13: 44-45

The worth of a hidden treasure is measured by what you will sell to gain it. The worth of a pearl is measured by what you will sell to buy it. The worth of the kingdom of God is made plain, not by how thankful we are to get the stuff that we want in this life, but by what we will gladly lose in the course of our dedication to the kingdom.

2 Corinthians 12: 9 – 10

Why do Christians Rejoice in Suffering?

- Acts 5: 41... “left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing...”

Because if they know it is bringing glory to God, they can rejoice in their suffering if they love the Lord’s glory more than their own comfort. That is why it is important for us to know these things...they will help us to rejoice as we think about the way our suffering glorifies the Lord.

- Hebrews 10: 34... “joyfully accepted confiscation...”

And if they really hope in something better and more lasting in heaven, then the loss of things in this life will not seem like an ultimate loss at all. They can lose things in this life without losing anything at all.

Should Christians Choose to Suffer for the Sake of the Name?

Finally, how should we think about our choices and decision with regard to suffering. It may be one thing to determine that Christians should be willing to accept suffering joyfully if it ultimately catches up with them, but should a Christian deliberately choose a life of suffering?

No and Yes. No we should not be foolish and act stupidly at thus tempt God. Paul, we know, used many means to try to avoid suffering and death when he could...Roman citizenship, friends hiding him, etc. But at the same time, he did choose to live a life of

suffering...deliberately. And we read elsewhere in the word that God's people will love him more than the comforts of life.

- Psalm 63:3... "steadfast love of the Lord is better than life."
Whatever we might choose, it is plain that God's love is better than anything we might lose for his sake.

- Phil. 3: 7-8... "suffer loss...that I may gain Christ."
This is especially true for us as Christians. Compared to the worth of gaining Christ, all that we might lose is nothing.

- Glad suffering shines brighter than gratitude.

And this is where, I hope, we begin to see the heart of what it means to say that Christians will joyfully embrace suffering. Because it is in our suffering that the worth of the Gospel gift is made plain to a world that does not believe the message of Christ. But how will the world see that we value the Gospel more than life if we basically chase after the same things that they do. If the limit of our dedication to Christ is simply to thank him for the "stuff" he gives us, how are we really any different than the world? They want money and power and comfort and pleasure...and so do many who claim the name of Christ. Even if we tag a "thank you Jesus" onto the end of our prayers, if all we seek after is what the world seeks after, they won't be impressed with the worth of the Gospel we tell...they will just despise us as religious hypocrites who use religious words to hide that fact that underneath, at the level of our desires, we are exactly like them and want the same things.

How is Our Hope Made Visible?(1 Peter 3:15).

So if we not like them, if we genuinely value the worth of the Gospel above all things, is that visible to others? If other people were to look at your life, would it be clear to them that you hope in something different than they? Or would they just think that your Christianity was a tool you use to help you get all the same things that they want...comfort, success, safety, money and approval from others?

Well, how is our hope made visible to others, for better or for worse.

- Missions and a wartime lifestyle.

We are not to seek after simplicity for simplicity's sake. But we are told in Luke 12:29 seek after the things of the world, like material possessions, because all the pagan nations seek after them. No we are to seek after the kingdom without being anxious for the temporal things that the world chases after. We are to do this for the sake of the kingdom.

Is that true for you? Is your lifestyle so different than the people around you that it elicits questions about what YOU hope in, since you clearly don't hope in the same things they do?

- American retirement vs. Christian discipleship

What about your hopes for the future? Maybe one of the clearest ways that Americans show the real nature of what they hope in...really...is through the American concept of retirement. I know most of the folks here are not yet seriously contemplating their "golden years", but it's not too soon to formulate your plans for how you will end the race, if God gives you a long life. Certainly God in his wisdom understands about diminished energy as our bodies finally fail. But I am talking about what you will do if God gives you 20 years of good health and vigor after you perhaps leave your career at 65. Are you planning and saving now so you can spend those years in idle self indulgence?

To do so, I want to simply read a quote from John Piper for you to consider:

How many Christians set their sights on a "Sabbath Evening" of life – resting, playing, traveling, etc. – the world's substitute for heaven since they do not believe that there will be one beyond the grave. The mindset is that we must reward ourselves in this life for the long years of labor. Eternal rest and joy after death is an irrelevant consideration. What a strange reward for a Christian to set his sights on! Twenty years of leisure while living in the midst of the last days of infinite consequence for millions of unreached people. What a tragic way to finish the last lap before entering the presence of the King who finished his so differently!

- Planning reveals the real hopes of the heart.

But lest I let some of you twenty-somethings feel like you got a walk on this point, planning for retirement is certainly not the only kind of planning that reveals the real hopes of the heart. What about each of you? What are you planning for this year, next year, five years from now? Certainly planning is not sin. We are told in Proverbs not to be like the sluggard who fails to plan in his laziness.

But is our planning, are our daydreams, informed and changed by our experience in Christ, or are they just a nice and morally respectable variation on the same self-focused tune that plays in the heart of every lost person in America? A nice job, a good car, plenty of opportunities for professional growth, a good-looking spouse (when it seems convenient), a safe house in the suburbs, good schools for your kids, an church that is helpful and uplifting but not too demanding, respect and admiration from your peers, enough relationships with other to make you feel useful but not inconvenienced, safety, comfort and security now, in this life...or...

Do you find yourself hoping and planning for a future that would be totally insane unless a sovereign God really exists and will hold you up with his mighty hand? Have you ever daydreamed about what it would be like to be counted worthy of dying for the sake of the Gospel? Does your passion to see God's name glorified compel you dream of a future that makes you tremble with fear and with anticipation? Has anyone ever asked you about why you seem to hope in things that are so different from what they hope and plan for?

- Let There be No Talk of Ultimate Self-denial

Near the end of his chapter on Suffering and the Worth of the Gospel, John Piper puts it very well when he writes this:

From the youngest to the oldest, Christ is calling his church to a radical, wartime engagement in world missions. He is making it plain that it will not happen without pain. But let there be no Christian self-pity, no talk of ultimate self-denial. It is simply amazing how consistent are the testimonies of missionaries who have suffered for the gospel. Virtually all of them bear witness of the abundant joy and overriding compensations. Those who have suffered most speak in the most lavish terms of the supreme blessing and joy of giving their lives away for others....

From this discovery I have learned that the way of love is both the way of self-denial and the way of ultimate joy. We deny ourselves the fleeting pleasures of sin and luxury and self-absorption in order to seek the kingdom above all things. In doing so we bring the greatest good to others, we magnify the worth of Christ as a treasure chest of joy, and we find our greatest satisfaction.

God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him. And the supremacy of that glory shines most brightly when the satisfaction that we have in him endures in spite of suffering and pain in the mission of love. – John Piper.

What does your view of suffering, and endurance under it for Christ's sake, say about the worth of the Gospel compared to the comforts of the world?

