

GRACE CHURCH MID-WEEK SERVICE

A THEOLOGY OF SUFFERING: PART 1 – 7/20/2022

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Just as instances of miraculous deliverance, provision, protection, and healing are meant to be a part of the Christian life, so also are various kinds and degrees of suffering. The Father empowered Jesus with the miraculous to put Himself and His Son on display—fascinatingly, the greatest and most profound expression of His power was seen at Calvary. The glory of Jesus was amplified to his highest level when God’s power was the most restrained. The preeminence of God is seen in the face of Christ as Cosmic King *and* as Suffering Servant.
- B. The NT speaks of the journey of a believer as not only being one designed to meet with, experience, and encounter the living God, but also one that is familiar with hardship and affliction (although, as we will see, it is important not to distinguish between these two realities as separate entities—i.e., God’s glory and presence keeps company with suffering).

Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. ¹⁴ For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it. Matt. 7:13–14¹

I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world! John 16:33

Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, ¹¹ my persecutions, and my suffering the things that happened to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. What persecutions I endured! Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. ¹² Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. ¹³ But wicked people and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving others and being deceived. ¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. 2 Tim. 3:10–17

Therefore, let those suffering in accordance with God’s will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good. 1 Pet. 4:19

I know, O LORD...that in faithfulness You have afflicted me. Ps. 119:75 (NKJV)

¹ Unless noted otherwise, all scripture quotations come from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

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II. GOD'S DESIGN

A. The common idea that obedience and faithfulness to Jesus in this age will result in a constant increase of comfort in domestic affairs, peace in relationships, and popularity or favorable recognition in ministry, is foreign to the Bible. The question is not *if* we will suffer, but rather *when* and *how*.

B. Having this delusion shattered is necessary if we are to glorify Christ in the thick of it and if our hearts are to persevere through it. To persist in errors related to God's leadership and suffering will leave one either offended with God (for not fulfilling their understanding of His obligation to procure them comfort) or condemning of themselves (for the supposed sin or unbelief that has caused it).

Others (the exemplary men and women of faith) ***were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. 36Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 37They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— 38of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. 39Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, 40since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect. Heb. 11:35b–40***

C. All hardship we face comes with the promise that the tender compassion of Jesus is with us *in it*, the assurance of the ultimate eradication *of it*, and the confidence that God has a design *for it* – a design for *His glory* and for *our good*.

D. We live in an age of *darkness* and *wickedness*, looking for the dawning of *the age of light* and *righteousness*. As such, God's outward reward for righteousness and His judgment of wickedness is for the most part (i.e., not completely) *restrained*.

Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. 23Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. 24But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Luke 6:22–24

E. We are commanded to set our hope fully on the Day of the Lord when Jesus will judge all things. When we lack a clear vision of His return, we inadvertently misappropriate the promises of the age to come into the present evil age—this blurring is disastrous.

Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. 1 Pet. 1:13 (NKJV)

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, 12training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that

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are self-controlled, upright, and godly, 13while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. Titus 2:11-13

- F. Having this eschatological view before us, we can see that the biblical presentation of life in this age is *tribulation unto great tribulation*. In many ways, the circumstantial ease we experience in the West hinders our ability to be connected to this reality. This has resulted in parts of the Western Church forming doctrines that feed their appetites for personal comfort—i.e., self-sacrifice (via tithing, service, etc.) guarantees a divine blessing.
- G. As we will see below, this stark dichotomy between divine blessing and present-day suffering is both unbiblical and extremely abnormal historically (both in Judaism and Christianity). They are not antithetical to each other but are complementary. When we can see this relationship between the two, it will help us to not be ensnared by the errors of romanticizing suffering (esp. concerning the end of the age – cf. Matt. 24:3, 9, 21–22; Rev. 6:9–11; 13:7; Dan. 12:7) or seeing it is a divine consequence of your marred relationship with Jesus.

III. PAUL & THE AFFLICTED HEIRS OF CHRIST

- A. There are two primary texts that will be in focus in this section – Rom. 8:17 and 8:35–39.
- B. The reason these are central to our discussion is because they get to the heart of Paul’s main objective in his Roman epistle—that God is faithful to the promises He made with Abraham and his descendants, and nothing can separate those in Christ from their inheritance in Him.

For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” 16it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. Rom. 8:15–17.

- C. In 8:17 the phrase, “heirs of God” (cf. 4:13) is significant because it enriches our understanding of a believer’s identity. He then expounds upon what “heirs of God” are by saying it is they who are “glorified with him.” Nonetheless, this glorification does not come without pain; it happens because of suffering. Paul could have written, “if we suffer with him in order that we may also receive our inheritance as heirs,” but instead of using “heirs of God” he writes of “being glorified with him.” Thus, he is using “glorified with him” and “inheritance” interchangeably, resulting in the fact that suffering is the chosen path for God’s adopted glorified heirs.

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- D. By doing this, Paul is saying that “suffering is the path to future glorification,” and to be “glorified with him” is “*just another way* of describing the future inheritance of believers.”² Furthermore, the *goal* of God’s salvation is that humanity will share in and experience the glory of God (cf. Rom. 2:7, 10; 5:2; 8:21; 9:23; 1 Cor. 2:7; 15:43; 2 Cor. 3:18; 4:17; Phil. 3:21; Col. 1:27; 3:4; 1 Thess. 2:12; 2 Thess. 2:14).
- E. “Heirs of God” refers to the time when those “in Christ” will take possession of a renewed earth and reign alongside the King of kings. Paul is encouraging the Christian community of Rome to see themselves as “heirs of the world” through Christ (4:13), but those living in Rome were not having that type of experience (e.g., the Claudian expulsion in 49 A.D.; cf. Acts 18:2).³ Thus, the future hope of earth’s restoration and humanity’s liberation from sin and death was far removed from the present experience of the Jewish-Christian community in Rome.
- F. The subject of suffering seen in 8:17 (“suffer with”),⁴ continues into 8:18 (“sufferings”), 8:22, 23, 26 (“groan with,” creation, believers, God’s Spirit),⁵ and esp., 8:31–39. This theme runs as an undercurrent throughout Paul’s point in the chapter. In fact, there are scholars who believe that suffering is the central theme to all of Romans 8.⁶

² Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT 6 [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998], 428, emphasis added.

³ Historical precedent for expulsion of Jews by Claudius in 49 A.D. due to the “instigation of Chrestus” as stated in Suetonius, *Claud.* 25. Suetonius gives no date for expulsion. There is no consensus on this subject (cf. J. M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora. From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE–117 CE)* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996], 303–306). Cassius Dio (*Hist.* 60.6.6) says the Jews were not expelled but were told they could no longer have meetings. He dates it at 41 C.E. Acts 18:2 references the expulsion, and it is dated to 49 C.E. (for arguments, cf. John M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora* [London: University of California Press, 1999], 303). Proposed solution: Claudius in 41CE – synagogue gatherings are banned. Claudius in 49CE – some Christian Jews were banned. At the very least, this emphasizes the instability of a Jewish Christian’s status in Rome. After they are able to return, they may be coming back to nothing (i.e., confiscated properties, gathering restrictions, inability to obtain Kosher food, etc.). This is the socio-economical context to which Paul is writing in Rome.

⁴ The word used for “suffering” in 8:17 (πάσχειν, páskeēn) often carries a sense of martyrdom in Paul and the other NT writings (cf. John S. Pobee, *Persecution and Martyrdom in the Theology of Paul*, JSNTSup 6 [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985], 5, 112). When this is connected with the trial list of 8:35–39, it “seems likely that these verses were written against the backdrop of persecution and suffering, whether this had actually occurred, or was expected to happen in the future” (Mark Forman, *The Politics of Inheritance in Romans*, SFNTSMS 148 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011], 123).

⁵ In 8:22 the use of στυγνάζω, “groan with,” also carries tones of persecution. When examined in the OT, one finds that Israel groans amid oppressive circumstances. This was commonly the result of them living under foreign rule. S. C. Keesmaat says, “This language of groaning originated in Israel’s first experience of empire, and was repeatedly used when Israel found herself suffering under imperial control during her history” (“The Psalms in Romans and Galatians,” in *The Psalms in the New Testament*, ed. S. Moyise and M. Menkes [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004], 149).

⁶ Cf. Silvia C. Keesmaat, *Paul and His Story: (Re)Interpreting the Exodus Tradition*, 89; and the sources he cites.

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- G. Paul tells us not only *what* an “heir of God” is and *who* the recipients are but also *how* we are to be overcomers in the most oppressive of circumstances. Romans 8:17 articulates that suffering is an integral part of those who are in Christ. “If” (εἰ) begins the verse to convey that a “necessary and sufficient condition” has been fulfilled—i.e., “since it is the case that we are children of God...”⁷

and if (εἰ) children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if (εἴπερ), in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. Rom. 8:17

- H. It is the next “if” (εἴπερ) that introduces the clause on suffering. The “if we suffer,” combined with the “so that” we may receive glorification, denotes that “suffering with Christ is not an optional extra or a decline or lapse from the saving purpose of God. On the contrary, it is a necessary and indispensable part of that purpose.”⁸

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 36As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.” 37No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Rom. 8:35–39

- I. Continuing to our next set of verses, the connection between 8:17 (suffering with Christ) and 8:35–39 is seen not only in the list of trials (e.g., hardship, distress, persecution, etc.) but more significantly in the quotation of Ps. 44:22:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 36As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.” 37No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Rom. 8:35–39

⁷ Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, WBC 38A (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 456.

⁸ Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 456, emphasis added; cf. Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT 6 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 428. Furthermore, the understanding of suffering preceding redemption and glory can be seen in OT Prophetic literature (e.g., Isa. 40:1–5; 52:13–53:12 [e.g., 53:3, 11]; Dan. 7:21–22), Intertestamental texts (cf. Byrne, *Romans*, 256), and even Jewish texts that are post Paul (*I Enoch* 102–105; *Jub.* 23:23–31; *4 Ezra* 6:25–28; *2 Bar.* 15:7, 8; 25). The Intertestamental and post Pauline texts shows us that the idea of suffering preceding glory existed in Judaism before and after Paul. Thus, this would not have been a foreign idea to his Jewish-Christian audience.

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- J. It would be difficult to argue that Paul is not giving a general encouragement to those undergoing persecution in Rome. As Schreiner identifies, “such mockery and suffering are inevitably the lot of Christians.”⁹
- K. That said, Richard B. Hays has identified that the citation of the Psalm draws into question God’s faithfulness to His covenant with Israel. The psalmist is probably writing in the midst of suffering (probably the Babylonian exile). They are asking whether God has abandoned them. As Hays points out, Paul’s quotation of this Psalm “serves to intensify the depiction of suffering and to sharpen the question of God’s faithfulness.”¹⁰ Thus, Paul is sharpening his focus upon the comparison between suffering and glorification (i.e., His faithfulness to His promises).
- L. Paul’s answer to the plea of Psalm 44 is paradoxical—the suffering and persecuted are not defeated but rather are “more than conquerors” (8:37). He says that “all things work together for good for those who love God” (8:28) and that it is by being “sheep to be slaughtered” (8:36) that we are “more than conquerors” (8:37).
- M. With a tantamount reversal, Paul maintains that those who “are being killed all day long” are the very ones who are “more than conquerors through him who loved us.” This explains why he makes the claim in 8:37 that those who suffer *are* the conquerors. It is by virtue of one’s union with Christ that one is considered a suffering conqueror and an afflicted victor.¹¹ This is an example that has been set for us by Jesus himself. As Robert Jewett states, “These victors, as v. 32 declared, inherit the ‘all,’ but only in the midst of their ongoing vulnerability and suffering on behalf of Christ.”¹²
- N. The outcome is that Paul intends the final statement of 8:37—that nothing in all of creation “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”—is a final confident “‘catch-all,’” of his that embraces “anything that one might think has been omitted from the previous list.”¹³
- O. As a final note, the insights of Ben Witherington III serve us well. He observes that out of all the items listed that cannot separate the believer from God’s love, the one unincorporated is the believer themselves. The implication being a significant point: if Christ is for us, our only real threat will arise from within ourselves.¹⁴

⁹ Schreiner, *Romans*, 464. Neil Elliot identifies that the afflictions mentioned in 8:35, “would have evoked sharp echoes of very recent events in Rome itself” (“Romans 13 in the context of Imperial Propaganda,” in *Paul and Empire*, ed. R. A. Horsley [Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1997], 194; cf. Käseman, *Romans*, 249–50).

¹⁰ *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 58.

¹¹ Forman, *Politics of Inheritance*, 132.

¹² “Impeaching Gods Elect: Romans 8:33–37 in Its Rhetorical Situation,” in *Paul, Luke and the Greco-Roman World*, eds. O. Christofferson, C. Clausen, et. al., JSNTSup 217 (Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 57.

¹³ Douglas J. Moo, *Letter to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 546.

¹⁴ Witherington, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 234.

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- P. Paul is clear in his articulation in Romans 8 concerning the experience of believers as being concurrently freed from sin, enslaved to a bondage of decay that participates in a groaning with creation for greater freedom, adopted as children of God, and awaiting a future adoption amid trials and tribulations. An already-but-not-yet tension between suffering and deliverance is *the* authentic experience for the life of a believer.

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings... Phil. 3:10