

Reflections on Suffering

Matthew 16:21-28

“Called To Suffering”

It is a strange reality that when we talk about the gospel, about the love of God, about the call to repentance and faith, about the salvation offered through the death of God's son, our Lord Jesus Christ - for some reason people take offence.

Sadly, that means that Christians all over the world are persecuted for their faith. Even today, some people lose their families, their homes and their livelihoods. Yet in spite of that they stand firm in their conviction, and their hope in Jesus.

We too, in some small way, may face persecutions of a kind: perhaps ridicule, perhaps rejection of some sort, or sometime just being made to feel a bit of an outsider, as we try to live in manner pleasing to God, in the face of a world that is turning more and more away from him.

Be of good cheer, this is all a part of your Christian calling. To stand firm, to hold on, to keep faith in Jesus, no matter what, is all part of the declaration of the high value in which you hold him, and all testifies to the power and to the truth of the gospel.



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BIBLE CLASS

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A few weeks ago we spent a little time looking at hope and suffering, and saw how Paul encourages us to place our suffering within the greater context of the glory of God, which will be our eternal joy and satisfaction.

We made reference to the suffering of Jesus, who himself endured because of the joy set before him.

Today we are going to pause a little longer on Jesus' particular call to suffer.

The passage we read comes at a time after John the Baptist had been killed: one may say the first man in the New Testament to die for the conviction that Jesus really is the Christ.

And immediately before this passage, we read that Peter makes that very same confession, when Jesus asks who people say he is, Peter responds “you are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

It seems to be in response to these events, that Jesus starts to talk to his disciples about his own suffering and about what awaits him.

Jesus tells them plainly that he will go to Jerusalem, that he will suffer “many things,” and that he will be killed, and also that he will be raised on the third day.

So often the disciples seem to misunderstand the significance of what Jesus is saying, and in many cases it is not until the disciples receive the Holy Spirit following Jesus' resurrection, that they are equipped to take hold of what he was actually teaching them.

One thing, however, is obviously clear to Peter now: Jesus just said he was going to be killed!

Something unthinkable and unacceptable to Peter.

The idea that Jesus, Peter's teacher, his mentor, his friend, was about to go willingly to his death, was inconceivable, and Peter can't help himself, but declare "This shall never happen to you."

How wrong he was.

How little he understood, at that time, the plan and purpose of God.

Jesus turns and rebukes Peter: Peter, the one to whom the truth of Jesus' messiahship had been revealed by God directly, this same Peter is now chastised with the most cutting words, "get behind me Satan."

What Peter failed to understand was that the suffering to which Jesus was going, was not a failure, not a sad end to a promising career. Jesus' suffering was not the side effect of his ministry, but the substance of it.

We are told in Acts that all this was a part of the perfect plan of God, that in spite of the schemes and devices of the Jewish leaders, and the Roman authorities it was God himself who oversaw the unfolding of the final days of Jesus' life, Peter declaring it to be "according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God"

The Holy Spirit which led Jesus into the wilderness at the start of his ministry, was still with him, leading him to the events of passion week.

Jesus was called to suffer: he was born, he was raised, he lived, he taught and healed, all as a prelude, as it were, to the real essence of his ministry which was to go to the cross, to suffer the consequences of the sins of humanity, and to make a way for all people everywhere, to be reconciled to God, through faith.

Without Jesus' death on the cross, without his willingness to suffer, without his taking the burden of our sins upon himself, we would be

without hope in the world, and without the offer of God's gracious mercy.

Suffering was a the part of Jesus' ministry.

Both John the Baptist, and Peter, had declared that Jesus was the coming messiah, but neither had fully understood what that calling entailed.

John perhaps died before the person and ministry of Jesus could be revealed to him, Peter, on the other hand was to live many years, and learn the implications of Jesus' call to suffering.

Not least, that as the master, Jesus', was called to suffering, so too the followers. Peter himself, as indeed did all the disciples, was to suffer for the cause of the gospel and for the proclamation of Jesus Christ the Messiah.

Jesus said "If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you."

This call to suffer was not isolated to the disciples of the first century.

It is a sad truth that men and women everywhere throughout the course of the last two thousand years have suffered for Christ, and for their hope of salvation in him.

Indeed, the call to faith is described by Jesus himself, in the passage before us as denying oneself and taking up ones own cross.

This is not to say that all suffering is part of our calling: sometimes we suffer as a consequence of our own failing, or the failings of others, and sometimes we suffer as a result of the disorder of the fallen natural order.

Though we try to endure these sufferings with God's grace, it is more specifically suffering for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of the truth of Jesus' and his work for us on the cross, to which we are actually called.