

Sufferings In The Christian Perspective.

Text: Rom 8:18

Suggested Hymns:

401, 403, 414, 282, 415

1) What does the Apostle mean when he speaks of sufferings?

2) The glory which shall be revealed in us

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Romans 8:18, ¹⁸ *For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

“Life is basically tragic,” a woman of learning wrote to her pastor. *“It is true,”* she continued, *“there are some happy experiences: the sunrise, the sunset, your first love, your baby’s face — but these are only interludes in an otherwise dark picture. And even in these blessings there are moth and rust.”*

Does she not re-echo the sentiments of Eliphaz, a friend of Job, ⁷ *“Yet man is born to trouble, As the sparks fly upward.”?*¹ Does she not seem to say feebly what the Epistle Lesson for today states with picturesque forcefulness, ²² *For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now.* ²³ *Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves.*²

Yes, it is a dark picture when viewed in the setting of unforgiven sin; life troubled and perplexed today, without hope for tomorrow, moving toward eternal tragedy.

But the gloom vanishes when we add to this picture the words of the inspired writer of the Epistle Lesson, *eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.* Against the background of God’s redeeming love the perspective changes completely.

In times when people are inclined to share the views of the woman quoted before, let us, on the basis of our text, prayerfully study, *Sufferings in the Christian Perspective*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. What Does The Apostle Mean When In Our Text He Speaks Of Sufferings?

He does not include the pain and distress that a person creates for himself in his mind. There are some individuals who derive satisfaction from exaggerating their physical ailments. For reasons of which they are not always aware, they magnify their distress out of all proportion to what it actually is.

Some people are unhappy because they feel that they are not duly appreciated for what they are and for what they achieve. A few people receive recognition, while others are ignored. Some people suffer because they look at people through the eyes of suspicion. They see ulterior motives and evil plans where none exist.

Finally, there are many who are haunted by worry and fear. In addition to the burdens of today, they carry the imagined burdens of tomorrow, of next week, and yes, of years to come.

All of these people actually suffer. But they suffer needlessly, and yes, they suffer sinfully, because their pains are born out of a lack of faith and love.

There are also sufferings that are the penalty of specific sins. The individual violates the laws of God through intemperance or unchastity. He pays for his folly with impaired or wrecked health. Another shocks the public conscience through some crime. As a result, he now lives in the shadows of disgrace.

Aroused to the seriousness of his plight, the offender turns penitently to the Lord who has said, ²⁸ ***“Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”***³ The Saviour, who on the cross has atoned for all sins, comforts him with the assurance, ***“Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you.”***⁴ And ***“Though your sins are like scarlet, They shall be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They shall be as wool.”***⁵

Yes, all is forgiven by an offended, but gracious God. However, some of the effects of sin may continue. Shattered health does not yield to treatment. There remain the handicaps of a chronic ailment or of a progressive disease. But

the restored prodigal suffers as a child of God who is now at peace with his heavenly Father.

In the midst of physical distress he can say with the poet,⁶

Rest, weary heart!
The penalty is borne, the ransom paid,
For all thy sins full satisfaction made!
Strive not to do thyself what Christ has done,
Claim the free gift, and make the joy thine own;
No more by pangs of guilt and fear distress,
Rest! Calmly rest!

His suffering now becomes a refining fire that purifies and strengthens his faith.

The second offender continues to be socially disgraced, even after he has received the complete pardon of God. But through those dark shadows he will let his light shine before men that they may see his good works and ultimately glorify the Father, who has called him into the marvellous light of the Gospel.

Sufferings of such offenders, may therefore, be included in the sum total of distress of which the Apostle speaks.

But there are also many sufferings which cannot be traced to any particular sins, yes, which frequently come to some of God's most devoted Christians. They may appear in the form of serious a illness. They may be bodily pains that border on the unbearable.

At such a time the afflicted Christian turns to his heavenly Father, who has said, *"I will not leave you nor forsake you."*⁷ But somehow God seems to have vanished. Perplexed, the sufferer cries out with Job,³ *Oh, that I knew where I might find Him! ...*⁸ *"Look, I go forward, but He is not there, And backward, but I cannot perceive Him;"*⁹ *When He works on the left hand, I cannot behold Him; When He turns to the right hand, I cannot see Him.*⁸

There may be severe physical handicaps, resulting from some chronic ailment or an accident. The dreams of youth seem shattered. Life's purposes appear defeated. A limited and an isolated existence is now his.

If some member of the family is afflicted, the distress reaches deeply into his own life. Ask the father and mother who have the care of a disabled son or daughter. Ask those who may be seen regularly at the bedside of a relative who is in isolation due to a contagious disease and is fighting a long battle to regain his health.

Ask the person who for years calls on some member of the family who is a patient in a mental hospital, where he lives in a world of distressing unreality. Ask the relatives of the young men and women who return from the valiant service given for their country but now have physical or mental problems.

Add to this darkening picture the heartaches resulting from personal bereavement. The haunting loneliness is an experience with which only those can fully sympathise who through death have lost someone whose life was intimately intertwined with their own.

There are also sufferings caused through financial reverses. The savings made possible through hard work and personal sacrifices; the savings which should have provided for the education of growing sons or daughters or which should have been the source of a comfortable old age: these destroyed or vanished into the hands of someone else. This is an experience which has shaken the faith of many a Christian.

Finally, there are sufferings inflicted by some member or members of one's own family; a drinking husband, a faithless wife, an unbelieving friend who delights in tormenting the other about his religion, disobedient children, or a child who has become wayward.

A smiling face may hide the heartaches of the sufferer to the outside world, but here the distress is really much harder to endure than that of illness, physical handicaps, or financial losses.

2. The Glory Which Shall Be Revealed In Us.

All of these sufferings, and many more, the apostle places into the setting of what he calls the glory which shall be revealed in us.

As he now looks at them, he discovers that they shrink in size and become small, so small that they are not worthy to be compared with its grandeur.

Who is this writer? Is he a youthful man who has not ventured beyond the protection which loving and thoughtful parents had given him? No one who has ever really listened to the Epistle Lesson for Sexagesima Sunday can do otherwise than wonder how any human being could have endured all the sufferings, physical and mental, recounted there.

Let us recall part of this Epistle lesson. It is 2 Corinthians 11:21-12:9, ... ²³ *Are they ministers of Christ? -- I speak as a fool -- I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often.*

²⁴ *From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one.* ²⁵ *Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep;* ²⁶ *in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren;* ²⁷ *in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness --* ²⁸ *besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches.*

... ³² *In Damascus the governor, under Aretas the king, was guarding the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desiring to arrest me;* ³³ *but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands.*

¹ *It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord:* ² *I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago -- whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows -- such a one was caught up to the third heaven.* ³ *And I know such a man -- whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows --* ⁴ *how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.*

...⁷ *And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure.* ⁸ *Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me.* ⁹ *And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore*

most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

St. Paul, the man afflicted with all of this, says in our text that all of this is so insignificant as to almost disappear from sight in the large setting of the glory that lies ahead.

What does he mean with this glory? Is he only thinking of that which is to be found in heaven?

In one of the German picture galleries is a painting called "*Cloudland.*" It hangs at the end of a long gallery, and at first sight it looks like a daub of confused colour, without design. But as you approach it, the picture begins to take shape; it proves to be a mass of little angel faces.

This reminds us of the lines in William Cowper's famous hymn:⁹

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessing on your head.

Job names one of these blessings, in Job 23:10, ¹⁰ ***But He knows the way that I take; When He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold.*** In the time of trouble, God takes us aside and reads to us the story of our own lives. We see what we vaguely sensed or failed to notice at all: much that is ugly and out of harmony with the new life created in us by the Holy Spirit. And with the help of God, the power of these sins is broken. Faith is freed from the parasites that were threatening to destroy it.

In the hour of trial God, above all, reveals Himself more fully than was possible in the day of health and prosperity, when we, perhaps, with our lips confessed our trust in God, but in reality depended too much on our own ability. We become painfully aware of our own helplessness and then seek refuge with the Lord who said, "***Call upon Me in the day of trouble.***"¹⁰

A prominent business man had a Christian wife who died praying that he might become a Christian also. One night, while lying awake in the darkness of his room, he heard a voice from the little bed at his side, "*Take my hand, Daddy, it's so dark.*" He took the small, trembling hand into his own until the frightened

child fell asleep. Then he looked up through the darkness and said, *“Father, take my hand as I have taken the hand of my child, and give me rest of soul, for Jesus’ sake.”* It was then that he received the comforting presence of God.

In such times there come to mind God’s sustaining promises, ¹⁰ ***Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.***¹¹ ²⁷ ***The eternal God is your refuge, And underneath are the everlasting arms.***¹² God then is no longer a vague Being whose existence we have proved to ourselves through a series of arguments, but rather a living reality, so near that He is at our side, yes, also underneath us with His all-sufficient grace.

A trust comes into being which enables us to say with Job, ¹⁵ ***Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him,***¹³ or, as Luther states it, *“I would run into the arms of Christ, though He stood with a drawn sword in His hand.”*

This is the kind of faith that overcomes the world, that is more than a conqueror through Him who loved us. This is the kind of faith that cannot but speak of Jesus Christ who can save to the uttermost. It is the kind of faith that speaks to fellow sufferers in the language that they can understand.

Thus suffering becomes a ladder that leads to a glory of Christian witnessing and service alongside of which the so-called troubles of life dwindle into insignificance.

But the Apostle regards all of this merely as a prelude to an infinitely greater glory, the glory which he saw when he was caught up into paradise and heard unspeakable words. It is a glory which the human mind cannot grasp nor human language express.

If you wish to measure it, then think of the sacrifice which was made to restore the fallen human race: God’s only-begotten Son, very God of very God, becomes man and suffers all that the sin-laden human race should have suffered. A glory made possible by such an offering must be marvellous beyond human imagination.

It is the glory of a sinless life. It is the glory of a life spent in the very presence of God, whom we shall see face to face. It is the glory of an endless life of complete happiness.

How small in comparison the troubles of life appear! Yes, they are not worthy to be compared.

In this perspective the life of a Christian is certainly not tragic. It is a life in which the deep undercurrent is that of the peace of God which surpasses all understanding. It is a life in which the Christian may, and yes, should rejoice in the Lord always. It is a life of glory that grows until it reaches its fullness in the infinite glory of heaven.

Heavenly Father, grant us this life, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Job 5:7

² Romans 8:22-23

³ Matthew 11:28

⁴ Matthew 9:2

⁵ Isaiah 1:18

⁶ Poem 363, Anonymous, *742 Heart-warming Poems*, Compiled by John Rice, 1964

⁷ Joshua 1:5

⁸ Job 23:3, 8-9

⁹ Hymn 414, God moves in a mysterious way

¹⁰ Psalm 50:15

¹¹ Isaiah 41:10

¹² Deuteronomy 33:27

¹³ Job 13:15