

The Value of Suffering II Corinthians 4:7-15

If God is love, Why must Christians suffer? For many of our brothers and sisters around the world, this question is urgent. For example, last year the Chinese government tore down the Golden Lampstand Church in Shanxi Province where 50,000 Christians worshipped. The Boko Haram radical Islamic group continues to terrorize Christians in Nigeria. In fact, according to Open Doors, 1 in 9 Christians worldwide experienced serious persecution last year. How does all this pain and suffering fit into our understanding of a loving God?

Well, for non-Christians, the answer is easy – it doesn't. That was certainly what the ancient pagans thought, many of whom lived in Corinth at the time Paul wrote this letter. Their ancestors had made up a bunch of phony gods for them to worship, and they imagined those gods to be just more powerful versions of human beings. So, they believed their gods valued all the same things we think are important: wealth, fame, and above all, success. Thus, they believed that people who succeed must have been blessed by the gods, and those who suffer must have been cursed in some way. Pagans just couldn't imagine that suffering could ever be a blessing.

The Jews of Paul's time weren't much different. Oh, they worshipped the real God, but like the pagans, they believed that He pours out His blessings on the righteous and reserves suffering for the wicked. And to be fair, they got this idea at least in part because of Scriptures like Psalm 116, which we read responsively this morning: "Gracious is the Lord, and righteous. I was brought low and He helped me." Sure, their own history made it clear that God allowed His people to suffer when they were being unfaithful to Him. But for suffering to be part of His plan to bless the righteous? No way.

Well, what about us modern Americans? What gets our attention and earns our respect? We tune into talent contests from American Idol to the Voice to The World's Best to celebrate excellent performances. All sorts of athletic competitions routinely draw large crowds, both in person and onscreen. In fact, of the top ten TV programs last year, only two were not football games – the state of the union address and Prince Harry's wedding. Like the people of Paul's time, we celebrate winners, and have little use for losers.

And the church all too often tags right along with the culture in this respect. Many of the best known preachers are proclaiming what is known as the "health and wealth" gospel, the notion that God wants you to be happy, and that all you have to do is name what you want and claim it in the name of Jesus. So, it's no wonder their congregations are so big – who wouldn't want to follow a God who wants everyone to drive a Cadillac?

And even us conservative evangelicals can slip into this sort of triumphalist, success-oriented thinking. It's easy for us as pastors to measure the impact of our ministry according to the numbers of people in the pews and the number of dollars in the plate. It's easy for us as individuals to believe that God loves us when everything in our lives is going the way we think it should.

But what do we pastors do when folks just don't show up for worship? What do all of us do when the car breaks down or we get hurt or we lose a job or when chronic pain or disease comes to call? How could any of that be God's will? And why would God allow people to suffer precisely because of their Christian faith?

In today's passage, Paul makes it clear that he not only understood this kind of suffering, but that he had experienced a great deal of it. In verses 8 and 9 he admits what would have been embarrassing to any pagan or Jew of the time – that he had been, at various times, afflicted, perplexed, persecuted and struck down. In the eyes of the unbelieving world, he was therefore nothing but a loser. But at the same time, he contends that he wasn't crushed by any of the ill-treatment he received because of his Christian faith. Instead, in verses 10 and 11 he says that enduring this sort of suffering is in fact the best way for any of us to manifest, to reveal Christ to the world.

How can that make sense? Well, look at verse 7, where Paul compares himself to a common clay pot with something valuable inside. He's saying that he doesn't want anyone to be impressed with him, at how wise or clever or persuasive he is. Instead, he wants everyone's attention to be focused on Jesus. So, if we know most people are interested in success and excellence, what better way could there be to get the focus off of ourselves than to demonstrate the weakness, the inadequacy that our sufferings reveal? And what better way could there be for us to exalt the strength and compassion of the Lord than for us to praise Him, giving Him all the glory when He relieves our suffering?

The psalmist did the same sort of thing in our responsive reading this morning, didn't he? He admits that he had gone through great distress and sorrow, coming very near to death. He goes on to admit that he was brought very low. You can't get much more helpless than that. But he also says that he called out to God to save his life. He then recalls how God saved him, rescuing him from death.

So, how does he respond to this deliverance? At the end of the psalm, he says that he will call on the name of the Lord and offer sacrifices of thanksgiving. In fact, that's the whole point of the psalm – to give all the credit to God for his deliverance.

So sure, no one likes to suffer. But if none of us ever went through tough times, if God never had to save us, we wouldn't have nearly as much reason to give Him thanks and praise, would we? Perhaps more importantly, if our lives were always smooth and pleasant and prosperous, it would be easy for the watching world to give us all the credit. And we might even be tempted to do the same thing, congratulating ourselves for whatever success we might enjoy. No, it's only the evidence of our weakness that makes God's strength stand out. It's our suffering that makes God's salvation most obvious. It's in clay pots that God's glory shines through most clearly.

But let's face it. Sometimes we do sing God's praise when everything is going the way we think it should, when life meets all of our expectations. But when we do that, on those good days, are we truly grateful for God Himself, or just for what He gives us? On the days of bright sunshine and fair breezes, is our attention on the Giver or on the gifts? When we have everything we want, are we really trusting God, or just happy with what we have?

No, just as our weakness shows God's strength and salvation most clearly, so our times of need draw us to a truer, a more earnest trust in God. That's the spirit of faith Paul talks about in verse 13, as he quotes from Psalm 116, and the psalmist certainly demonstrated that kind of trust as well.

Of course there are different ways we can express such trust. The psalmist was convinced that God would deliver him in this life – that he would walk before the Lord in the land of the living. And we've all seen examples of this kind of deliverance, haven't we? We've seen God answer all sorts of prayers for healing and restoration, even when doctors have given up hope. We've seen God provide

jobs to the unemployed and safety to those in dangerous situations. We know God blesses us in the land of the living.

On the other hand, Paul's trust in verse 14 was more broadly defined, looking as he was toward the Day of Resurrection. And all those who trust in Christ have the same hope, even when we lose our loved ones. Because Jesus rose from the dead, we cling to hope even in our greatest grief – the hope that we will see our loved ones again on the same day that we see Jesus.

So, even on our worst days, the days of sickness and sadness, the days of loneliness and danger, we have the same kind of hope that both Paul and the psalmist had. In spite of our difficult circumstances, or even perhaps because of them, we can turn to the Lord, placing our faith not in ourselves but in God, whether in this world or in the world to come.

And come to think of it, didn't Jesus do the same thing? As He poured out His soul in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, as He begged that the cup of God's wrath might be removed from Him, He nevertheless said to the Father, "Not my will, but Yours be done." And while He hung on the cross, suffering at the hands of the Father because of your sins and mine, His faith never wavered. For among His last words, He quoted from Psalm 31: "Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit." Yes, Jesus' faith shone brightest even when it was obvious that He would not receive blessings in this world. His faith was clearest in His darkest hour, even as He faced death itself.

And His cross shows us yet another blessing that suffering can bring into the life of any Christian. For our suffering doesn't just show God's power most clearly. And our suffering doesn't just make our faith in Christ shine most clearly. No, it is only when we suffer that we can most clearly reveal the character of Christ within us. As Paul says in verses 10 and 11, it is only when the death of Christ is displayed within us that His life can be most clearly seen through us.

For remember, Jesus didn't experience the kind of successful, pain-free life that most of us want in this world. He didn't use His tremendous power to guarantee comfort and prosperity for Himself, the way most of us would. Moreover, He didn't transform all the difficult circumstances of His people, even though he could have made all their problems disappear with a single word. Instead, He laid down His life for the sake of others. He gained victory over sin and death for all of us only by enduring the greatest sort of suffering, only by becoming a loser in the eyes of the watching world. It was only by taking up His cross that He could accomplish the will of the Father for us.

And that's the only way any of us can truly follow Him – by doing what He did, by taking up our own cross, dying to our own comfort and prosperity and success so that others might be blessed. That's what Paul means in verse 12 when he says that death is at work in him so that the Corinthians might have life – he was willing to suffer all sorts of dangers and difficulties so that they might experience new life in Christ. Just so, it is only by dying to ourselves in such a way that we can truly reflect the self-sacrificial, unconditional love of Christ.

No, suffering is never pleasant, and enduring it is never easy. But as it reveals our weakness, it can show God's power. And as we endure it, it can reveal our faith more clearly. But it is when we follow the example of Jesus, when we choose to endure suffering for His sake and for the good of others, that's when we draw the closest to Christ. And that's when He can best use us to draw others to Himself.