

Sermon Summary #7

The Gift (?) of Suffering Philippians 1:27-30

How do you respond when God gives you something you don't want? How would you describe your feelings when God brings people, circumstances, and situations into your life that are at best inconvenient and at worst irritating, exasperating, and perhaps even life threatening?

Feeling grateful and appreciative and giving thanks to God when he orchestrates life so that you get what you want is easy. But how do you respond on those occasions when you reflect on what you *don't* have but wish you did, or when you think about what you *do* have but wish you didn't?

Let me be even more specific. We are only two months separated from Thanksgiving, and therefore about ten months shy of the next one. Think back to November of 2012, as you sat around a table with family and friends, a table covered with sumptuous food and luscious desserts. ***How many of you paused and thanked God for suffering?*** Did you think it fitting that you should express your appreciation for hardships, setbacks, trials, and afflictions, or did you express your gratitude for a life largely free of opposition and persecution?

I know what you're thinking! "But Sam, we were at a Thanksgiving dinner, not a funeral! November is the time of year for praising God for the gifts that he has graciously bestowed." That's right. And according to Paul, who was writing under the infallible influence and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, one of God's most precious gifts to you and me, as his children, is suffering! Listen again to v. 29 – ***“For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake.”***

By the way, in case you hadn't thought much about it, preaching a message like this isn't the most effective way to build a megachurch! But since I have no dreams of building a megachurch, I'm going to stick with what Paul says!

The Enemy

Evidently the enemies of the gospel in Philippi had become hostile, perhaps even physically abusive, going so far as to threaten the lives of the Christians in that community. Being in prison, Paul obviously can't do much to help them and is clearly concerned that the opposition they are facing may divide and conquer. In other words, he's fearful that in the face of the enemy these believers might fragment and weaken in their unity and end up failing to live in a way that is fitting for those who profess the gospel of Jesus. So he exhorts them to stand fast and to stand united, striving together for the faith of the gospel. He is especially concerned that they not be frightened or intimidated by their opponents.

The Exhortation (vv. 27-28)

There is actually only one exhortation in these verses that comes to expression in three different but related ways.

The command or exhortation is found in v. 27 where he tells them and us: "let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ" (v. 27a). The word translated ***“manner of life”*** is incredibly instructive and important for us. This isn't the normal word Paul uses for living the Christian life (that would be either *peripateo* = to walk [Eph. 4:1; Gal. 5:16; etc.], or *zao* = to live). Here he uses a word found nowhere else in his writings: *politeuo*, from which we get our English word "politics" and "polity" (it is used one other place by Luke, Acts 23:1).

The word meant "to live as a citizen of a free state" to "take an active part in the affairs of state." But why use it here? The reason is tied to the Philippians themselves. They were very, very proud of their status as a Roman colony. They were a patriotic people who celebrated their civic identity. I can identify with the Philippians. As

cheesy as this may strike some of you, every time that huge Oklahoma state flag is displayed at an OU football game in Norman, I fight back tears. My love for our state and my pride in it is deep and emotional.

Here Paul is appealing to their patriotic loyalty to their native land. He's saying, "Think about your feelings for the city of Philippi and the loyalty you feel toward Rome. Now, with that image in mind, remember that you are actually citizens of a *heavenly city-state, the New Jerusalem!*" In Philippians 3:20, Paul writes, "But our citizenship (and here he uses *politeuma*, the noun form that is related to the verb *politeuo* in 1:27) is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ."

All this to say that Paul's emphasis is on *how Christians must live on earth as loyal and patriotic citizens of heaven! If I may apply this to you and me today, the point is that we must conduct ourselves in conformity to the principles of the New Jerusalem, that heavenly city of which we are citizens. We are governed first and foremost by its laws and its values, not those of any earthly city or state.*

To sum up: Give expression to your heavenly citizenship as Christians with the same if not greater zeal, loyalty, and devotion that you do to your earthly citizenship as Americans, or in the case of the Philippians, as Romans.

In saying that our conduct in this regard is to be "*worthy*" of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Paul doesn't mean we should live in such a way that we hope to become or make ourselves worthy of Christ or that we hope to merit a place in his kingdom. No, we are to live in a manner that is fitting for the citizens of a heavenly kingdom. We are to live in a manner appropriate to those who have been called out of darkness and granted a place in the kingdom of Christ. Or again, the gospel of Jesus Christ deserves our full allegiance; it calls for a standard of life above the norm. It is the *gospel's* worth, not ours, that Paul has in mind. Live in the light of *its* glory and greatness.

The way this manner of life comes to expression is then unpacked in three ways.

(1) The first of the three things that Paul wants to see among the Philippians is that they are "*standing firm in one spirit*" (v. 27b). This verb "standing firm" conveys the notion of unflinching courage and steadfastness, as if we were soldiers who refused to give so much as an inch of ground to the enemy.

Although the word "spirit" is not capitalized, I believe Paul is referring to the Holy Spirit. Because they have believed the gospel and are now one body in Christ, it is the Spirit in whom they stand and fight and struggle to live in a manner worthy of the Lord. He is appealing to their common experience of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the source of the strength you need to stand firm and not back down in cowardice and compromise.

As much as it might appear to others that we are just a bunch of individuals who share very little in common, we are in fact profoundly united and intimately interconnected by virtue of the one and only Spirit of God who indwells us and in whom we stand!

(2) The second thing Paul wants is to see them (and us) "*with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel*" (v. 27c).

The word "faith" here does not refer to our personal subjective belief but rather to *the objective biblical and theological truths that we find in Scripture*. This is why our Statement of Faith at Bridgeway is so essential. It serves to identify and articulate for all to see and hear what we believe the "faith of the gospel" to be. God doesn't expect us to agree on every minor or secondary point of doctrine. But he does want us to strive to be united in our thinking and believing on the major points of Christian truth. Satan would love nothing more than to empty this church of its influence and its example in OKC by dividing us up into warring factions over things like the deity of Christ or his substitutionary atonement or the inspiration of Scripture or salvation by grace alone through faith alone. *We are to make whatever sacrifice is necessary in the power of the Spirit in which we stand to make certain this never occurs.*

(3) The third and final way that our lives are to reflect the worth of the gospel is to be certain that we are "*not frightened in anything by our opponents*" (v. 28a).

Although we are always to be humble, there is also a certain “bravado” or confidence in our manner, such that we refuse to be intimidated by our enemies, no matter how they may threaten us or even persecute and oppress us.

The steadfastness of Christians in standing firm in one Spirit and our unity of mind in contending for the one gospel of truth and our courage in refusing to be fearful of their opposition, all serve as a “*sign*.” On the one hand, it is a sign to them that they will ultimately lose! They may win a battle here and there. But when Christians bravely stand together in unity for the sake of the truth, this sends a clear and unmistakable message to the non-Christian world. It loudly declares: “You’re going to lose and we’re going to win.”

Paul may actually be suggesting that *God works secretly on the minds of non-Christians*, bringing conviction to them that such behavior on their part can only bring destruction and condemnation. On the other hand, he likewise enables them (and us) to recognize in our strength and unity and endurance the saving presence of God! Of course, even if they don’t recognize it, the way Christians stand firm in the face of their enemies signals *their judgment and our salvation*.

And don’t you dare let yourself skip over that marvelous phrase at the end of v. 28 – “*and that from God!*” And “what” from God? Primarily the salvation he just mentioned. But it would also include everything that has gone before: our living a life worthy of the gospel, standing firm in one Spirit, striving for unity in our affirmation of the truth, and not living in fear of the enemy. It’s all from God!

But that’s a pretty tall order! Seriously, living worthily of the gospel in a city where people hate Jesus . . . standing firm and maintaining a unified front without fear of what they might do to us . . . like I said, that’s a pretty tall order. How can we pull it off? On what does Paul even base his exhortation? The answer is found in vv. 29-30, as seen in that important little word, “*for*” . . .

The Explanation (vv. 29-30)

I’m just going to come right out and say it as bluntly as Paul does: ***Suffering is as much God’s eternal and gracious purpose for your life as is your salvation!*** To think of salvation as a divine gift is no struggle. But to speak of suffering in the same way strikes most people as just this side of insane.

Let Paul make his point to you and me with the particular word he chose to employ: “*it has been granted*” (v. 29a). Most of you know that the Greek word for “grace” is *charis*. It’s not uncommon for Christians to name their daughter “*Charissa*.” Even our English term “*charismatic*” comes from the Greek for grace and refers to our belief in spiritual gifts that God graciously bestows. Well, the verb form of *charis* is *charidzomai*. It means ***to graciously give or to bestow as an expression of favor and love***. In Luke 7:21, Jesus is said to have graciously granted sight to the blind. In Luke 7:42 he graciously forgives sin. In Romans 8:32 Paul spoke of God’s “freely” or “graciously” giving us all things necessary for salvation. In each case it is this same Greek verb.

Think about the nature of a “gift.” It is typically something you are ***glad to receive***; it is an expression of the giver’s love for you; it is ***undeserved***. You “pay” what you “owe” but you “give” what no one can claim. And when you receive a gift you ought to ***give thanks*** to the one who cared enough for you to make the sacrifice.

Here Paul declares that “suffering” is a gift of God’s grace! It is *not portrayed as divine punishment* for all your failures. *Neither is it discipline* designed to straighten you out and alert you to the unrepentant sin in your life. This is *no chance happening* that unluckily came your way when God was preoccupied with other matters. This was *no reluctant concession* on God’s part as he wanted to prevent it but for some reason couldn’t. No, ***it is a privilege, a gift, an expression of undeserved kindness!***

Paul’s point, then, is that as many as have received the gift of faith to believe in Jesus for eternal life have also received the gift of suffering that Jesus might be glorified in their life.

Can this really be true? Are we sure Paul didn’t blurt this out following some sort of brain freeze or minor stroke? Well, let’s look elsewhere in the NT to see if we find anything similar:

“Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12). So, if you *don't* desire to live a godly life in Christ, you're ok. No need to worry.

“Remember the word that I said to you,” declared Jesus: “A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20). So, again, *if you do not regard Jesus as your Lord and Master*, relax. There should be no persecution in your future.

According to both Paul and Barnabas, it is “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). So, if you have *no desire or intentions* about entering God's kingdom, you shouldn't be troubled by the prospect of “many tribulations.”

Paul prays that “no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this” (1 Thessalonians 3:3).

There it is: suffering, persecution, tribulations, all of which have the potential either for good or bad. Suffering can unite and bond families or it can rip them to shreds. Suffering can create confident, dependent trust in God or sow seeds of bitterness and anger and resentment. You know the old saying: “The same sun that hardens clay, melts wax.” Trials and hardships and opposition from the non-Christian world will harden some like brittle clay, baking in bitterness and anger. The same trials, the same afflictions, can melt others, teaching them patience and endurance and building character.

Please do not misunderstand what I'm saying to you, or what Paul is saying. We are to give thanks for suffering *not because God wants us to take pleasure in pain; not because God wants us to pretend that evil is good; and certainly not because there is any inherent or intrinsic value in hardship and trials*. There is no virtue or joy in affliction or adversity considered in and of themselves.

God wants us to give thanks **not** because of what suffering **is** but because of what suffering **does**; not because of what afflictions are but what by God's grace **we become** as a result of them. God graciously grants suffering not because he takes sadistic glee in seeing his children hurt but because he knows that it not only brings them into greater conformity to Jesus but also, and primarily, because it is the most effective way to magnify and glorify him.

Let me try to make sense of this by mentioning the *three primary reasons* why God orchestrates life in such a way that his children suffer persecution and trials and opposition from the enemies of the faith.

First, give thanks for suffering because of what it accomplishes for you personally. In particular, I have in mind what it accomplishes for your faith and for your future.

(a) for your *faith* –

“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:2-4).

“Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Romans 5:3-5).

(b) for your *future* –

“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matthew 5:11-12).

“So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all

comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18).

“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed” (1 Peter 4:12-13).

Second, give thanks for suffering because of what it accomplishes for others.

(a) it equips you to *encourage* them –

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too” (2 Corinthians 1:3-5).

(b) it equips you to *evangelize* them –

“I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear” (Philippians 1:12-14; see also 2 Cor. 4:7-11).

Third, and by far and away the most important reason of all, give thanks for suffering because of what it accomplishes for the praise and honor of Christ.

Look closely again at v. 29. Did you notice how Paul boldly declares that our suffering is “*for the sake of Christ*” and then again “*for his sake*”? How can that possibly be true? What benefit could come to the name and fame of Jesus because his people bear up patiently under persecution?

(a) for his *glory* –

“For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many” (2 Corinthians 1:8-11).

(b) for his *greatness* –

“Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this [thorn in the flesh], that it should leave me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

All our sufferings, all our trials, all our discomfort, all the pain inflicted by an unbelieving world, whether it be emotional, physical, or financial, is designed by God to magnify the beauty of Christ's all-sufficient-grace.

What, then, is the *takeaway* for you and me? Some of you suffer more than others for your faith: cut off from family, cut off from inheritance, cut off from co-workers, crucial information withheld, your efforts undermined, your name

slandered, a client lost, a promotion lost, a job lost, a friend lost, and for our brothers and sisters in Christ in other countries, perhaps even a life lost. God would have us remember two things:

(1) *Never forget the absolute necessity of Christian unity, of standing firm in one and the same Holy Spirit, striving together with one mind for the same gospel of truth (v. 27).* When you stand alone, it's easy to be intimidated and frightened. If ever a case was to be made for spiritual community in the local church, it is here. We need one another when persecution approaches. We need one another when opposition intensifies.

(2) *Never forget the reason why God has called us to suffer. It is for Christ's "sake" (v. 29), for his glory, for the praise of his name, so that others will watch and marvel at the majesty and sufficiency of his beauty and grace.*

Rosaria Champagne Butterfield was in her own words a radical feminist, a lesbian, and a professor of English literature at Syracuse University. She regularly taught courses in postmodern deconstruction, gay and lesbian studies, and what is known as "Queer" theory. And then she met Jesus. She has written a remarkable book chronicling her conversion, titled: *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: an english professor's journey into christian faith* (Crown and Covenant, 2012). When she turned her back on her lesbian lifestyle and radical feminist politics, the persecution she endured from former colleagues, friends, and students was almost unimaginable. In her book she tells the story of one profound encounter:

"My lesbian neighbor . . . was dying of cancer. She approached me one day and said, 'I didn't give a damn about who God was to you in your happiness. But now that you are suffering, I want to know: who *is* your God? Where is he in your suffering?'" (60; italics mine)

I'll close with one final comment by John Piper. Listen closely:

"We do not choose suffering simply because we are told to, but because the One who tells us to describes it as the path to everlasting joy. He beckons us into the obedience of suffering not to demonstrate the strength of our devotion to duty or to reveal the vigor of our moral resolve or to prove the heights of our tolerance for pain, but rather to manifest, in childlike faith, the infinite preciousness of His all-satisfying promises" (*Desiring God*, 287).

Will you then join with me, together with Paul and the Philippians, and give thanks for the gift of suffering?

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