

## INTRODUCTION

God wants to make us the kind of people who take risks to love and show compassion. Those who throw aside the need for comfort and ease, who risk their own safety, security, possessions, and perhaps even their own lives in the cause of love and good deeds (10:24-25). How do we stir up one another to this? That's what this passage is about. In this text, we see a group of Christians who see brothers in need and step in, knowing that they would suffer for it. They possessed a serious, deep, and profound joy which empowered them to suffer, even choose the path of great suffering in the path of compassion.

***The key to invincible and courageous joy when faced with great suffering is in confidently knowing that what we have in Christ is infinitely better and more lasting anything this world can offer.***

And so if and when something is stripped from us, our joy is NOT because our real treasure in Christ is not. This kind of joy is what fuels a faith that will endure to the end - one that says what we all repeated last week: *"We are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls"*. This joy is what leads Christians to even take risks in living publicly for Christ, joyfully accepting whatever consequences come.

## AFTER WARNING, ENCOURAGEMENT

In this passage, the author's intent is clear. He wants to encourage the faith of these timid and fearful Christians. And so after a strong warning about the serious dangers of shrinking back and the fearful prospects of falling into the hands of the living God in judgment, he encourages them by reminding them of their past. And it is interesting what he reminds them of. He reminds them of how they suffered well back when they were first born again.

Verse 32 starts with, "But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings." Enlightened here refers to their salvation. When the light of the gospel shone in their darkened hearts and they believed. Notice, he doesn't just say, "When you were enlightened, you suffered." He says, "you endured a hard struggle with sufferings." The word translated struggle is "athlesis", from which we get the word athletics. So this suffering was like a contest - like combat or a wrestling match. And what was this combat with? Sufferings. What they endured was real, hard, and serious. It was a hard struggle with sufferings. And there were basically three groups that the sufferers fell into.

The **first** group experienced public reproach and affliction (READ verse 33). They were reproached or denounced as troublemakers, verbally harassed, and slandered as evildoers. Up until the time of Constantine in the early 4th century, it was common for Christians to be the scapegoat in the Roman empire. If there was a plague, it was blamed on the Christians. If a natural disaster occurred, Christians were blamed. If there was civil unrest, Christians were blamed. In AD 64, Nero set Rome on fire and blamed the Christians. So they were always an easy target of this kind of slanderous reproach.

They experienced affliction, meaning they were put under incredible pressure. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 4:8, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed." In other words, we are pressed, but not completely squashed. What this pressure undoubtedly included was, "deny Christ". Take a look at your family, business, etc. Pledge your allegiance to Caesar (pinch of incense). So they were denounced and pressured. And all of this was done in public, not behind closed doors. These Christians were made a public spectacle for all to see.

The **second** group of sufferers were those thrown into prison (READ Verse 34). It seems obvious that this was not just an angry mob of Roman citizens, right. This was official opposition by the governing authorities. This was government sanctioned persecution of Christians. It's not hard to see how the first group - those who suffered reproach and affliction - were eventually those thrown into prison, because they wouldn't cave to the pressure. The **third** group were those who loved and cared for the Christians in prison. And the author really focuses on this group... and for good reason. Verse 33 says that they suffered by: "*being partners with those so treated.*"

They endured suffering by being partners with those who suffered imprisonment. This is amazing. It gives the idea that they could have stayed out of it and avoided suffering. But instead verse 33 says they were "*partners with those so treated*". The word partner means to share in something, or brought into fellowship with someone, or to be a companion with someone. These Christians could have kept their noses clean and minded their own business and stayed out of trouble... and they didn't! Verse 34 gives us the explanation.

*For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you had a better possession and an abiding one.*

These Christians suffered because they had compassion on those in prison. Probably, they went to visit them and bring things that they would have needed to survive. You weren't given three square meals in a Roman prison. You needed family or friends to bring you food or warm clothes. In 2 Timothy 4, Paul asked Timothy to bring his cloak and to try to get there before winter. They had compassion on those in prison.

It's likely they took in children whose parents were in prison. They had compassion on them. They acted in love. It's been said that "**you can give without loving, but you can never love without giving**". This word compassion is so important for us to understand. There is one other place in the NT it's used. It's translated sympathize in Hebrews 4:15, when it says,

*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to **sympathize** (there it is!) with our weaknesses, but one who in every way respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.*

The word compassion or sympathize means to "be affected with the same feeling as another". Jesus sympathized with us by entering into our condition in the incarnation and being tempted with sin. These Christians had compassion on those in prison by entering into their suffering. You could imagine what they

were thinking as they deliberated whether or not to show compassion to those in prison: “If we do this, it’s going to cost us. We will have a bullseye on us” We see what happened to them. Their property was plundered - robbed, seized, looted, trashed. They had compassion and because of that, their property was plundered.

Now, they didn’t take this sitting down. Their response really is breathtaking and astounding. They didn’t merely accept the plundering of their property. They **joyfully** accepted it. This is one of those places in the bible where if you are not careful, you can just read over and NOT say, “That’s weird.” And the author clearly connects the dots from their action (compassion on those in prison) to the consequences (property plundered) and their joyful acceptance of it. These Christians got together and had a party to celebrate that they had suffered persecution for Christ’s sake. That is strange... and wonderful! This may seem strange to us, but it shouldn’t. We see this pattern throughout the New Testament. Remember in Acts 5 when the apostles were arrested for preaching the gospel.

*And when they called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name [of Jesus]. (Acts 5:40-41)*

Peter, in his first epistle says that our rejoicing now in suffering for Christ will result in rejoicing at his return when he says, “Rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed” (1 Peter 4:13). And ultimately these were just doing what the Lord Jesus Christ said to do when he said in Matthew 5:

*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... (Matthew 5:11-12)*

Well, that is exactly what these Christians did. Their suffering was for the name of Christ and they accepted it joyfully. The all-important question is, what dynamic produces this strange joy, which then fuels a life of risk-taking compassion? This is the big question for us. Because it is a manifestation of this flavor of Christianity that magnifies Christ!

The explanation for this joy and risky compassion is given in the second part of verse 34 in the word, “*since [because] you knew that you had a better and possession and an abiding one.*” So Christians have a possession that is qualitatively better than anything in this life that can be taken away in this life. And Christians have a possession that is more durable than what can be taken away. I said this at the beginning: ***The key to invincible and courageous joy when faced with great suffering is in confidently knowing that what we have in Christ is infinitely better and more durable anything this world can offer.***

**They knew something...** Confident knowledge of the better and abiding possession in Christ. Verse 34 says,

*“Since you **knew** that you had a better possession and an abiding one...”*

They knew something and it gave them invincible joy. Knowledge. We live in a time where feelings rule the day, rather than knowledge. We should not be opposed to feelings. They are wonderful servants, but terrible masters. Being ruled by feelings is a sure road to disaster. We are to have a confident knowledge of this better and abiding possession we have in Christ, and the only way you get that is from the scriptures. Hosea 4:6 says, *“My people are destroyed for a lack of knowledge”*. When we are ignorant of God's truth, it makes our faith weak and tepid, and our joy shallow. Strong feelings without knowledge is no virtue.

So what is this possession that is better and abiding that we are to have knowledge of? **In a nutshell, it is Christ himself and the fullness of his salvation!** It is Christ himself. We get Him! And all the blessings that come through his salvation. We need to know these - not passively, but confidently. What does the author say, *“Do not throw away your confidence!”* Confident knowledge of Christ and his glorious salvation! This is not a one-time download, but we know and we grow in knowledge, and we do so together. Think of all that we have covered in Hebrews: rest for our souls, nearness to God, mutual possession (God is our God, we are his people), a new heart with love for God, intimate knowledge of God, total forgiveness such that God remembers our sins no more, a clear conscience in order to serve the living God. All of this - and foremost, the Giver of all these gifts! But here is the point - you must confidently know all of this is your possession in Christ.

You must know this as a **present reality, experienced partially, yet truly**. Real and precious, though experienced in part. We have real forgiveness now, real relationship with God now, we can really draw near to God now. You must know this possession as a **future reality**, in which it will be full and perfect forever. What does the author say in verse 36? *“You have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what is promised.”* This is pointing us to the future, something we don't experience now.

Paul said in Philippians 1, *“to depart and be with Christ is far better”*. He isn't inferring that he was without Christ. Rather there was a being with Christ that would be deeper and more complete. 2 Corinthians 5:2 says, *“In this tent (body) we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling.”* Knowledge of your possession in Christ fuels a courageous joy now! So meditate on these truths until you know them down in your bones.

We are not talking about just a head knowledge without touching the affections or emotions. You can have knowledge about something, but not love it. No, this is a knowledge that tastes the glory of the things known.

*“Don't throw away your confidence, which has a great reward” (verse 35).*

Jesus said, *“When you suffer for my sake, rejoice, for great is your reward in heaven.”* This better and abiding possession is a treasure. Listen to what John Calvin said:

*“Indeed wherever the feeling of heavenly good things is strong, there is no taste for the world with its allurements, so that no sense either of poverty or of shame can overwhelm our minds with sorrow. If then we wish to bear anything for Christ with patience [and joy] . . . let us grow accustomed to frequent meditation on that happiness in comparison with which all the goods of this world are but rubbish”*

Do you want to have a strong, durable, invincible, and courageous joy? Then you need to grow in the knowledge of this great possession that is yours in Christ. (1 Peter 1:3-9 if time permits).

Is Christ and his full salvation your greatest possession? Is it your greatest treasure? Then you are the most free and happy person on the planet. Free to live faithfully for Christ. Free to take risks for the good of others in love. What can be taken away from you? Romans 8:31-32 says, *“If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?”*