

# Suffering

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The difficulty we just had in getting the tape-recorder functioning for this speech might serve to introduce the subject "Suffering," for in this electronic age electrical failure is for some of us northern semi-suburbanites as close as we come to any patent suffering. Therein is also a disclaimer for my own competence to give this presentation. I propose to give at most only half of a presentation, therefore, and you people who have been witnessing and personally experiencing suffering much more than I have in the realm of human relations on the inter-racial level will surely have to provide the other half, and possibly also radically correct and rephrase and restructure what I propose to say.

My comments will not be purely hypothetical, however, for I have experienced a bit of suffering myself, but only in the smaller, more private "family and friends" human type of relations. But experience itself is not sufficient grounds for making these comments, because here, too, it takes the work of God and prayer to sanctify any aspect of human experience. I hope for the most part, to be drawing from the word of God, from Holy Scriptures and from the tradition of Christian theology, and then with that done, let you people bounce back with what your experience suggests to validate, change or extend my interpretation of the word of God.

# MORE THAN PAIN

The theme of suffering is surely written large in the Holy Scriptures. Beginning with Genesis Chapter 3, suffering is listed as one of the testimonies to the fact that the world now exists **after** the fall. The world in which man finds himself is a split world; something is wrong, and things are not the way they ought to be. The existence of suffering is one big signpost to that fact. In Genesis 3:16 ff., God speaks to His people and Himself gives the first interpretive word to their suffering.

I think it is important that God not only inflicts the suffering – the ground being cursed, Adam having thorns and thistles and the sweat of his brow, and Eve having her problems focused in her womanly role of wife and mother – (this is not just a bald assertion), but here too the word of God brings God into relationship with the suffering. A key concept running through the whole Scriptures is that suffering, no matter how it is analyzed, can never be ultimately seen until God's hand is seen in it, for whatever that might mean.

Suffering is not just the “ouch” notion that most of us sense when we meet the word suffering, as we equate suffering with pain. Suffering certainly does mean something that hurts, and Biblical references to suffering do have something of the “ouch” character to them. But there is more to suffering than just the “ouch.” Suffering is one facet of the total gap that actually does predominate in the split world that now exists.

It seems to me that we ought regularly to unite Genesis 5 with our understanding of the fall in Chapter 3 with its monotonous, repetitious phrase at the end of every paragraph: so-and-so begat so-and-so and he died, so-and-so begat so-and-so and he died, and he died and he died and he died. The Genesis writer is not just giving us historical chronology, that everyone died and

that is where his life stopped. This “and he died” is the tragic end, the finale, the sum total of suffering life in a now fallen world.

But suffering is more than just “ouch.” We must look at some additional implications or connotations of the word. One of them is still partially retained in our churchly use of Elizabethan English, in a phrase most of you still remember: “Suffer the little children to come unto me.” Here the word means permit, allow, let. We have to see this facet of it, this passive motif in suffering. Suffering is an aspect of the passive or the receptive life. Suffering is what comes to me. The use of the word “passion” as synonym for suffering includes this notion of passivity and being on the receiving end. The passion of our Lord refers to what He let happen to Him. Christ’s phrase, “Thy will be done,” is a key passage that should be incorporated into our understanding of what suffering is. Suffering is having things happen to you when you yourself are relatively, or maybe completely, unable to do anything about it.

This is obviously the case with most of our biological sufferings. Even for all of our preventive medicines, finally we “catch” pneumonia or we “catch” a cold. That is an irony of our language. Catch is an active verb, but I have never seen anyone go out and actively get a cold, but it comes to you. We would do better **not** catching it, but in most cases we cannot help it. And finally all of us catch the grand finale of suffering: we catch death as it catches up with us and we passively have to let it happen.

So suffering as Biblically viewed is one of the inevitable facts of life. One cannot escape it. This theme runs through the Old Testament literature. The whole book of Job is a long, dramatic dialogue of a man who is wrestling with his own suffering, becoming forcibly aware of the fact that man is born into

suffering just as naturally as sparks move up from a bonfire. Even in I Corinthians 10:1-13 when the apostle says that no temptation, no testing has come to you that is not common to man, he is telling his Christians in Corinth that just by virtue of their being human they are going to be susceptible to the troubles and problems of being tested. But rather than some form of fatalism the epistle calls for hope as it moves on to indicate what your suffering does for your relationship to God, and how God fits into your suffering. This is what the Genesis 3 report on suffering surely says, that even though the world is living after the fall and under the curse of suffering, God's hand is **in** suffering.

Suffering can be viewed, says Helmut Thielicke, as the gauze left sticking in a wound that is not yet healed, the purpose of which is to drain off the poisons so that ultimately healing can take place. But as long as the gauze remains in the wound, as long as suffering still exists in our lives, it is a reminder of unfulfilled healing, a reminder that the split and fallen world still is not restored, still needs to be restored. In that sense, just general suffering without any specific theological implications to it is a pre-evangelical sign of the fact that things are not the way they ought to be, and that in God's providence there still is another chapter, a new heaven and a new earth beyond the suffering existence that pertains at the moment.

## **MORE THAN SACRIFICE**

It might be bad enough to say that these are the givens of the fallen world. It hurts, and even worse than that it is inevitable. You cannot escape it. But the problem is compounded by the fact that men, even fallen men, **do** react to their suffering. They do put theological implications on it, even

before they come into any contact with the gospel or with the grace and mercy of God. Thus you also find throughout the Old Testament, specifically in the psalter, a suffering son of God, a suffering believer, who looks at some of his fellow sinners and extremely wicked friends and sees that they **do not** suffer – and this whole complex of the situation throws him into unfaith. We could simplify this by just saying that the problem of suffering in a fallen world is compounded by our own Pharisee-heresy. We may, for instance, look at the absence of suffering in our lives and use that as a measure of our virtue, our genuine qualities. We have not only kept our nose clean, but somehow we have not caught all those other things. Or conversely, and this is probably where most of us suffering servants of Jesus Christ are apt to compound our suffering by combining it with the Pharisee-heresy, we may measure our ultimate virtue and our real value by the length and number of scars that we can count on our bodies or on our psyches or on our lives. But I cannot find any place in the Biblical Scriptures where God gives anything like a purple heart to people for the number of wounds they have. Wounds and suffering, even here in society, say nothing about a man's value, nor about his ultimate worth with God.

This is surely especially dangerous in the ecclesiastical kind of forms it can and does take among some of us. Most of us here at the university have not gone out and gotten beaten yet, but we can piously say, "Look what I'm giving up to be teaching at a church institution. I'm sacrificing at least 50% more income – surely anywhere else I could be making that much more." Then there is that ecclesiastical masochism that goes out seeking suffering because it feels so good. We can see all those others who are not so good and who are not being hurt, and we can subtly apply the Pharisee-heresy to our own suffering. We seek our justification by suffering, our salvation by all that we

have sacrificed or had to give up – which of course now becomes heretical, when our salvation really rests in all that Christ suffered and all that He gave up.

## **REACTION OF FAITH**

It seems to me, therefore, that the core concern in Biblical theology on suffering is not whether there is suffering or not, or even whether we should get rid of suffering. Biblical theology says there is going to be suffering, so the core concern is my reaction to it.

How do I react? Basically, there are only two alternatives: in faith or in unfaith.

Job is finally brought to a faith-full reaction to his suffering, as many an Old Testament sufferer is. He confesses, “Though he slay me, yet will I trust him.”

It seems to me once more that I Corinthians 10:1-13 has this motif running through it. St. Paul, you may recall, is working through a few episodes of Old Testament history and is saying, “They murmured against God and they got cut down.” I think we miss the point if we just look at these and say, “St. Paul says if you’re not good you’re going to get into trouble, you’re going to have suffering.” But if you analyze these episodes, the first thing that Paul points to, Israel’s act, is already Israel’s reaction to a previous given situation of suffering. God had left them in the lurch when Moses disappeared up in the mountains and everything was so terribly quiet for so long – and this was the way they reacted to that uncomfortable situation. At other times in the wilderness their unfaith, their rebellion, was already their faithless reaction to suffering. St. Paul is telling us that when Israel really got into trouble was when they reacted in unfaith to trouble that God had originally sent

them, apparently trouble for which He had had a different purpose in mind.

It surely is no accident that in I Corinthians<sup>10</sup> St. Paul's big emphasis is "God is faithful, Who will not suffer you to be tempted beyond your strength," but will allow temptation, etc., so that you can endure it. The faithfulness of God is the point to which God wants His suffering man to have recourse, to which he wants him to flee. And every one of the Old Testament episodes in Paul's passage indicated that God's people did not take refuge or run to the faithful God, but in some form or other they ran to some other recourse, even if it was nothing more than all their gold and silver, so that they could build the calf.

So it is first of all a man's reaction to his suffering which counts, not whether or not he has some, or how he can or cannot get rid of it. I suggest that ultimately reacting in faith is how the Bible would say you really get rid of it. That demands some modification, however, since getting rid of it could also be interpreted as "escaping" suffering, which is not the Biblical perspective. The Biblical way for getting rid of it is with this word "endurance," the last word of the epistle lesson. God's assistance for suffering is not giving us escape, but giving us the stuff we need to endure it. Suffering is painful, it is unavoidable, it is ultimately destructive of life, and death itself is the end of suffering. Suffering is the status quo wherever the old era still prevails, even though God actually presides over this old era. If that is the case, one might expect that it ought to disappear completely when the new era, the acceptable year of the Lord, arrives.

Maybe it ought to, but it does not in the first chapter of that acceptable year of our Lord. It is no great secret that suffering is written large and right at the center of the life

and ministry of Jesus Christ. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews remarks in chapter 5:9, "Although He was the Son of God, He learned obedience through what He suffered." Just in the way this is phrased, the Hebrew writer indicates that we would not automatically think a Son of God ought to get involved in suffering. Yet he says, "Although He was the Son of God and you might not expect it to happen, nevertheless He **did** get involved in suffering, and His obedient Sonship, His being on the receiving end from the faithful Father, involved His continual life of suffering."

## **CHRIST'S SUFFERING MINISTRY**

I think there are at least three observations that can be made about the role or place of suffering in the life and ministry of Christ Himself.

### **IDENTIFICATION**

The first one is pretty obvious if in His incarnation and in His work He identifies totally with the men who lived in the old fallen world. If the identification is total, then whatever happens to them, even suffering, is also going to happen to Him.

### **CONFLICT**

But there is another theme that runs regularly through the New Testament that says

there is much more to His suffering than this. One facet is that He does not just submit and succumb to whatever dominates the old era, but He starts engaging in conflict with it. And it is this conflict with the tyrants of the old era, the principalities and powers now loose in a fallen world, that gets Him into some more suffering. When St. Paul later on talks about



some of his opponents as enemies of the cross of Christ, he is just picking up a half generation later the notion that runs through the presentation of Christ's ministry found in the gospels: that the world was also constantly in conflict with Christ and His cruciform ministry. Even though part of His obedience is that He **is** to go to the cross for the sake of the Father's will, to accomplish whatever it is that the Father has in mind, part of His going to the cross is **forced** upon Him by His conflict with the principalities and powers of His day. And these were incarnate not only in the Israelites, the Pharisaic Jews, but even in many cases in his own disciples, who were sometimes the spokesmen not for God but for God's enemies. John's gospel, for example, starts out by telling us "He came unto his own, but his own did not want him." And right away you ought to be aware that the ministry of the life of God in a fallen world will meet opposition, and this opposition is dedicated to the removal and extinction of the life of God in the world. The world concludes, then, that the only way to get rid of Him is to kill him, to make him suffer.

## **CONQUEST**

The third motif in Christ's suffering ministry is perhaps the first specifically positive assertion, that it is with his suffering that he suffers suffering out of existence. With his suffering he overcomes the very opponents who at one stage are the ones who inflict it upon him.

The letter to the Hebrews again, Chapter 2:14 summarizing several previous verses, says, "Since, therefore, the children share in flesh and blood (i.e., the children whom God wants to redeem) He, the Christ Himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death He might destroy him who has the power of death." It's a weird kind of theological alchemy, but this is the testimony of Biblical theology. Through suffering

and death He destroys the very power that suffering and death have over men's lives and destinies. The suffering motif is at the heart of His ministry to man. Because He is God's suffering servant, He is able to perform the service of bringing the **other** children of God **out** of the suffering. So a few verses later we read, "For because He Himself has suffered and been tempted, He is able to help those who are tempted." By virtue of His active, **willing** and ultimately victorious appropriation of the suffering ministry assigned Him by the Father, He is able to be the victor for every other man in his own personal suffering.

## **BAPTISM**

The suffering ministry of Christ is viewed by the New Testament in close connection to His baptism. The voice that comes from heaven at that event unites the royal victorious motif of Old Testament Davidic kingship with the suffering servant motif of Isaiah, so that precisely in **being** the suffering servant He **is** the victorious King, the promised Son of God. You remember that David's real claim to fame was that he himself was God's own adopted son (II Samuel, 7) and therefore a "son of David" is not just some one in the Davidic dynasty but to be **The** son of David is to be **The** Son of God. In His baptism He receives His "double" identity. "You are the one, my picked Son, my beloved one, and in the suffering servant role you fulfill the redemptive ministry assigned to the Messianic son of David."

Besides this association of Baptism and suffering with Christ at the Jordan the few additional times that Baptism is mentioned in the Synoptic gospels, it is mentioned in direct connection with suffering. One is the time when the sons of Zebedee came up to Jesus and asked "When you come into your kingdom, can I be prime minister and can I be the chancellor of the exchequer?" Jesus responds, "Do you men know what you are talking about?" And they **did not!** If they had any explicit thoughts about it at all they

thought the kingdom of God was something whereby one escapes suffering, and avoids it. So Jesus said, "Are you able to be baptized with my kind of baptism?" Here He did not mean – "Will you be able to stay under water in the Jordon for 30 seconds and come back up again," but here He is referring to the whole suffering ministry involved in **His** kind of baptism that any of His men are **also** going to have if they are going to be **His** men.

## **OLD AND NEW WORLDS**

In Christ's people the old age and God's new age overlap and the overlapping of the ages brings conflict and conflict brings suffering. As Christ tells His disciples in the Johannine gospel: "You are no longer of this cosmos, of this eon, but you are still in it," and later on of course the reason for His disciples still being in the world is because He has work still to be done in it and the disciples are his workmen.

Suffering is not eliminated from human history (including the very personal pieces of that history which you and I live, even as we live as children of God) even though Christ has sounded the end of the old age. In Christ the beginning of the end of the old age has come, but the end of that end has not happened yet. So Paul can say in Romans 8, "The old creation is still groaning in pain." But the pain of suffering is travail, birth pains. Something new is underway that has not yet come to complete fruition. And when it does come to fruition, then the full redemption of the sons of God will be revealed. The new age of redeemed Sons of God is already here, but the situation now is that it is not completely apparent, not obviously patent to the old eon, at all. And in so far as you and I are still the weak sinner-saints, it is often not very patent or apparent to us either. But this redemption is **already** what is at work, and when the end of the end of the old age comes, then it will be

clear, open, apparent to all, not only to the Christians, but also to those who for some reason or other never came in contact with it.

Thus one aspect of a Christian's suffering comes by virtue of his dual citizenship in both of the ages that do now exist, one of which is doomed ultimately to end, the other of which is as endurable as God Himself is enduring.

## **SUFFERING PLUS**

But besides this suffering, which is par for the course for anyone living in the "old age" including the Christian, (even though he now has insight into it which the pagan does not) the New Testament talks about the Christian as having even more suffering than the normal unredeemed sinner. For example, that is what Christ is telling the sons of Zebedee. "Be careful if you want to get involved with Me and My Kingdom, for besides drinking the cup of normal human existence and all that is involved in it, you are asking for an extra goblet besides." The extra goblet goes beyond Christ's identification with suffering humanity but comes from open conflict with the forces of evil that dominate the old age. Christians get involved in this additional suffering by virtue of their connection with Christ. St. Paul talks about Christians sharing Christ's suffering. Specifically in Phillipians 3:10 he says, "That I may know the power of His resurrection, and that I may share His suffering becoming like Him in His death, that if possible, I may obtain the resurrection from the dead," as though he meant – "Well, there's some chance and maybe I'll make it, maybe I won't." Actually he is saying the only possible way to obtain the resurrection from the dead is by participation in the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. By sharing in His suffering, your life takes on the dying form that His took on, and by that very

identification (expressed elsewhere by Paul as “baptized into His death”), becoming conformed to Him, you also become conformed to the last great chapter of His life, Easter Sunday and what follows it. This is the only way you attain **genuine** resurrection, the life that does not peter out when suffering reaches its full measure, death.

## **SUFFERING – A GIFT**

Another motif that runs through the epistolary literature is the view of Christian suffering as a gift. It is not simply the inevitable consequence that “if you get yourself mixed with Jesus Christ, this is what you’re going to get stuck with” but Paul talks about this as a special donation from God. “It has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in Him but should also suffer for His sake” (Phil. 1:29).

One consequence of seeing suffering as a gift would be to minimize any searching for suffering. The Christian searching for suffering might be just the ecclesiastical masochist mentioned previously. Paul suggests letting God give me the suffering that He has picked out for me so that I do not have to search for it. If I **am** looking around for places where I can engage in a suffering ministry, it may be because I cannot stand the “insufferable” ministry that God has laid before me or that I am turning my back on some other gifted suffering situation, which may not be on such a grand and glorious scale as I would like to suffer. There is more satisfaction in being the heroic sufferer than just to have to suffer in the family, or just to suffer in some little corner in the world where God seems to have dumped me off and apparently forgotten about me. But in speaking of the gift of suffering Paul says more than “Stop searching for suffering; let God give it to you.” This gift of

suffering is "Suffering for His sake." Suffering for Christ's sake is not just biting your lip and grinning and bearing it, and saying, "Well, Christ had to suffer, so I'm going to have to suffer, too, so I'll do this for His sake." "Suffering for His sake" is participation in the work His suffering achieved. His suffering was redemptive. His suffering brought about the new creation. His suffering rescued men from the old eon and transplanted them into God's new age of acceptance. This is the gift that has been given to you, to be God's partner in redemption, to be the synergist in the sense of being God's fellow-worker for the next man, for the rest of the old, unaccepted and **per se** unacceptable world that is around you.

The **gift** of suffering, being granted a chance to participate in the very work that Christ Himself initiated, is the most surprising element in the New Testament view of Christian suffering.

## RESULTS

In various places the New Testament cites three beneficiaries from my participation in the redemptive purposes of suffering. The first beneficiary is me. In my suffering God achieves His purposes for my redemption. Christian insight is to see that suffering is achieving a beneficial effect just for me, myself. In II Corinthians 1:8 St. Paul refers to such an episode in his own life. "We were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Why we felt that we had received the sentence of death; but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God." Here St. Paul says, "A given episode in my life had this salutary effect just on **me**, regardless of what else it may have achieved for anyone else. It forced **me** to go back to where my real reliance was." The implication is that Paul himself had wandered away from this reliance in his initial response to his

suffering. He had initially responded in some form of unredeemed un-faith. He calls it self-reliance. By the gift of suffering God had to beat down his self-reliance to the point where he was brought back to trust in God.

Viewed in terms of the struggle between flesh and spirit, the sinner and saint in each Christian, we might say that one of the good, Godly purposes that God achieves when I suffer is that He is killing off the sinner in my sinner-saint combination. This killing-off process **hurts!** Because that sinner is **me!** That sinner is not just a figment of my theological imagination but is a fact of my life. When God goes to work and says, "Sinner, I'm slowly but surely wiping you out," then there is plenty of 'ouch' there. Here my own self (sinner-self though it be) is being taken away from me. If that is all I have, if that is the only me that there is, then 'ouch', then 'no', then 'I refuse to suffer' would be the only reaction I could have to this kind of suffering. But the Christian is the new man of God, an **alter ego** as Galatians suggests, now in conflict with his own sinner-self. This other self is not merely me, but is Jesus Christ in me. Because of the existence of that alter-ego I can afford to **let** ("suffer") God kill off the old ego, the old sinner self. What is more I can actively actually start joining God in this process, and in that sense also become a synergist, a co-worker together with God, in helping God destroy the sinner that is in me. The Christian offers passive non-resistance, not resisting God's work at whittling away and chopping down the sinner self in me even though it hurts because it is **me** that is being destroyed.

Secondly St. Paul sees my suffering as God's redemptive action at work, not just for my good but also for the redemptive good of my fellow Christians. How fellow Christians see you respond to suffering becomes a proclamation of Christ to them, if you really are responding with Jesus Christ, if your response to

suffering **is** that it drives you back to rely on God instead of such alternatives as turning your back on it and running or even staying and facing it but doing so with the courage of your own intestinal fortitude. This makes fellow Christians the beneficiaries of my suffering.

Philippians also introduces the third circle of redemptive beneficiaries as Paul reports that his suffering became the witness of the gospel to the non-Christian world around him where God had not yet made any redemptive inroads. Let me paraphrase Philippians, chapter 1. "I want you to know, brethren, that what has happened to me – (and Paul just recorded some of the suffering he had) – has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole praetorian guard (and at the moment I am pre-supposing this is the pagan context of the house or prison he is in) and to all the rest (not just to the praetorian guard but apparently everybody that has ever even gotten **close** to Paul while he is sitting in jail) that my imprisonment is for Christ." Now he does not explicate how that happened or what that meant but in his own little summary statement he says, "Here's one of the effects that my suffering had on the whole world around me. It made them aware that I was here as Christ's man." And he says, "It was an advance of the gospel." Then he says, (backing up to the second ring of beneficiaries) "It is significant for the church, for the already existing Christians, and most of the brethren have been made confident in the Lord because of my imprisonment and are much more bold to speak the word of God without fear." Now these are just summary assertions about Paul's suffering but here he is saying "it was an advance of the gospel in the pagan world. It strengthened the faith of the fellow Christians surrounding me here, so that they themselves could be even better spokesmen in the pagan world that still surrounds them and to do it boldly and without fear." In short



the redemptive purposes of God were advanced in many people's lives.

## UNDER THE CROSS

The apostle in prison and, even more so, Christ on the cross might well be labeled: the ministry of the faithful failure. If you looked at Jesus Christ any time **before** Easter Sunday morning, you would say, "Well, there was a faithful failure. He apparently trusted God but it did not work." Now if our ministry is to be the extension of the ministry of Jesus Christ, we must have some place where we can incorporate "failure." At the point of failure we are most susceptible to evaluating by a theology of glory, instead of the theology of the Cross to use Luther's classic distinction. The faithful failure of Jesus Christ in dying at the end of His ministerial career is, however, the glorious **success** of God's ultimate purposes, not only just for that one man's life, that carpenter of Nazareth, but God's ultimate purposes for **all** human history and for every **human** life.

Just as the original gospel carrier lived not just Good Friday but His whole ministry under the cross, lived it hidden **under** the cross, (**sub cruce tecta**) so also the ministry of the Christian church remains **sub cruce tecta** until the ultimate revelation. The gift that has been granted to us, however, by virtue of our Christ-connection, is that we already **see**, we already **know**, we already have a hand-hold or a down payment on the glory that is involved, hidden under the cross. We are already now in touch with the life that is already there, even though it seems we just die from day to day. The theology of the cross reminds suffering servants today that all genuine theology, if it is the theology of Christ, will sooner or later, inevitably, invariably have this cross-bearing character. The

ministry of Christ is a cruciform ministry, for Him and for everyone who is His minister. In addition, the theology of the cross, especially as Luther sought to emphasize it, reminds us that in this cruciform ministry the power of God does what it does nowhere else. Here and here alone the very life-giving power of God is at work. It is through this ministry, hidden under the cross, that God **does** resurrect men. He **does** bring about a new heaven and a new earth. Sharing Christ's suffering and being conformed to His death is the **only** possible avenue to the resurrected life, either individually for one man or corporately for the whole world.

The minister is the cross-bearer. The cross-bearer is a burden-bearer. The burden that we have been called to bear is our brother and our brother's sins. Here the vicarious substitutionary theme comes into a Christian's suffering too. I do not **just** suffer because sin is still present in me and has to be extinguished. But as an active, conscious, intelligent synergist with God, I can start being the burden-bearer for the brother whose burdens have got him so far down that he cannot lift himself up. God puts the broken brother into the paths of us Good Samaritans, the brother who needs **me** to come and pick up his yoke and transplant him to another yoke, one that is easy, and a burden that is light. In vicarious suffering a Christian puts himself right there under the brother's burden and the brother's ultimate burden is his own sin. Christians are sin-bearers. They are not just Christophers, Christ-carriers carrying Christ to people, but in the whole process they are carrying people's sins away, carrying them to the Christ where they get nailed, crucified, and suffered out of existence.

## THE WHOLE PICTURE

The final New Testament aspect on suffering which we must still

consider is the connection of suffering with joy. One of the main difficulties we have in connecting suffering with joy is that we regularly think of joy as being the same as fun or pleasure. But fun and pleasure are always partial, most often momentary, and the New Testament notion of joy is a total term, a total term that ultimately is total in its theological content. In John's gospel Jesus tells His disciples that they are going to have sorrow, but that their sorrow will be turned to joy. What Jesus is saying here (especially in terms of John's major theme) is that their death is going to be turned to life. Their suffering existence in the old age is going to be changed by virtue of His ministry into the God-connected, accepted existence in the new age. Thus joy in the New Testament is first of all a theological term, and not a psychological state; how my psyche reacts. Joy is a theological term in that it says something about how God and I are acting and reacting. This is why the New Testament can connect suffering with joy. Both are positive theological realities.

Paul says, "In my suffering, Christ gets proclaimed and in that I rejoice." Paul can rejoice because of the **totality** of what he sees going on. He sees an event, his suffering, not just as an isolated event to which he might respond psychologically, happy or unhappy; but he sees it in the totality of God's saving plan, where all history is going. He sees it, in other words, in its relationship to its ultimate goal. He sees it in its connection with the end that God has in store both for him personally as well as for all of history. So joy implies seeing the whole vision and because I have the whole vision, therefore the parts, even the suffering parts, are such that I can respond by saying, "I see them in the whole vision." I see, for example, the fact **that** Divine life on this side of the ultimate resurrection **is** the cruciform life. When I see that as a fact, I can respond with joy because it **is** a joyful thing that the Divine life is

moving on its way toward the grand finale.

In Paul's classic discussion of the mind of Christ in Philippians he calls this the joy of His ministry, that He knew what he was going on and had a mind to pitch in to carry it through. So He responds to His ministry of suffering with joy because of this grasp of the whole, this grasp of the totality.

So joy and sufferings are combined because for them both the Christian has the insight into and the confidence in Christ's own redemptive work. Finally you can have this kind of joy in response to your own personal suffering only when you see Christ as the center of this new existence that is heading toward that goal. For this reason the Christian's joy is ultimately always, as St. Paul says in Philippians again, "Rejoicing in the Lord." Only in so far as He is at the center of things, can you respond to any situation with joy. Only with Christ do you have the vision of the totality and **know** that resurrection is what stands at the other side of death.

I want to close with a reminder of the last two of Luther's 95 theses. (94) "Christians should be exhorted to be diligent in following Christ their head, through penalties, death, hell, (95) and thus be confident of entering into heaven through many tribulations, rather than through the false security of peace." The only thing that I want to draw from them as a conclusion for us is how the Christian **overcomes** suffering.

He does not overcome suffering by escaping it and God does not supply the way by some escape hatch. But the way of escape that God supplies is, as last week's epistle says, the stuff to **endure** it. The escape that God offers His people is the wherewithal to endure. Avoiding it is not really escaping it. To turn your back on something and run is really to succumb and in this case to succumb to the unfaith that says, "I cannot take

this and still hang on to God. I cannot trust that God is going to hang on to me, as I move into this 'ouch' situation that is coming to me." By my own resources that is true. What is necessary, says Luther, is following Christ through the suffering and not trying to get around it. Following Christ, taking Christ together with me, or (better) letting Christ take me together with Him, into my suffering, that **is** genuine survival. That **is** eternal life.

This we must remember as we live our churchly lives **sub cruce tecta** that we may well indeed **be** in the valley of the shadow of death, in fact, we should not expect to be any place else, yet. That "valley of the shadow of death" may take a variety of forms – the inner-city, some racially tense community, some "bull-headed German" congregation, or some less grandiose valley of the shadow of death, as some of the death that still exists within us, some of our deathly fears, deathly hypocrisy, or deadly hatred of "the rabbits who run to the suburbs." Whatever the valley of the shadow of death is, it is **into** this valley that we have been **given** the opportunity to go, and in that valley we dare to be audacious, joyful, (and I am quoting Psalm 23) because we really **have** no evil to fear. We have no evil to fear not because there is none there – no, the evil, the valley, the shadow, the death, they **are** there, they are all around us. But the reason we can face them with joy is "For **Thou** art **with me**," and the "Thou" in this case is Jesus Christ, my Lord with me. Because I am here following "Christ, my head," through suffering, death and hell, I have the confidence that I will come out on the other side, by virtue of **His** having come out on the other side. This is but the thought of St. Paul, that we learn to know the power of His resurrection, not by avoiding, but as we share His sufferings, and as we take other sufferings and incorporate them into Christ's suffering and make them part of the redemptive ministry. In this we become like Him in His

death, because this is the only possible way to attain the resurrection into life.

Edward H Schroeder

[Suffering \(PDF\)](#)