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Suffering and Glory

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Suffering and Glory

Tom Ascol

One of the biblical promises that few people like to claim is one that the Lord Jesus Himself gave to His disciples the night He was betrayed. “In the world,” He said, “you will have tribulation” (John 16:33). Whether claimed or not that is one promise that will be inevitably kept for every person. All you have to do to see it fulfilled is to keep living.

The Fall brought disorder into the world and with that comes inevitable hardship and suffering. “Man is born to trouble, as the sparks fly upward” (Job 5:7). Christians are not exempt and, therefore, we should not be surprised when a “fiery trial” comes our way, thinking that something strange or unusual is happening to us (1 Peter 4:12).

The Bible says a great deal about suffering and when its teaching is taken seriously believers will be equipped to face the inescapable pain that comes from living in a fallen world. Paul’s words in Romans 8:18 provide a redemptive perspective that helps prepare us to think rightly about and persevere confidently through the trials and hardships of life.

“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.”

Paul takes an eternal perspective on suffering by thinking of it in terms of glory. He speaks of all Christian suffering and not just that which comes because a person is a Christian. Not all Christians significantly suffer for Christ but all will suffer in Christ. In the final analysis the distinction between the two is not critical. You bleed just as much if your hand is cut off in an accident as you would if it were cut off by an angry mob because of your devotion to Jesus.

There are four connections between suffering and glory that can be seen in this verse. The first is that they go together. The fact that suffering and glory would be connected at all is counterintuitive. Suffering speaks of trials, difficulties and sorrows while glory speaks of joy, bliss and delight. Yet, they are regularly linked together in the New Testament (e.g. Romans

8:17; Colossians 1:24–27; 2 Corinthians 4:17; 2 Timothy 2:12; 1 Peter 5:10).

Glory and suffering are both integral to Christian discipleship. Recognizing this provides a solid foundation for standing firm through all the vicissitudes of life. By keeping both in view Paul cultivated a healthy emotional life that enabled him to be “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing” at the same time (2 Corinthians 6:10).

The second connection between suffering and glory is that each characterizes a different age. Paul speaks of both the present and the future in Romans 8:18. Because of sin “this present time” is marked by suffering but the age to come is when glory “shall be revealed.” Though a foretaste of this glory belongs to all who are in Christ now the full revelation of it is reserved for the age to come. Only then, in the new heavens and new earth, will the full weight of glory be revealed in those who believe.

A third connection between suffering and glory is made by way of comparison. More accurately, the connection is that they cannot be compared with any equity. Our present sufferings are not worth comparing to our future glory. The reason for this is not because Christians suffer less than others or that somehow our suffering is of a lesser quality than others. Rather, the reason Paul makes this comparative analysis is due to the fact that the glory that awaits believers is incredibly great.

The Christian’s future glory includes a transformed body (Philippians 3:20–21), a transformed mind (1 Corinthians 13:12) and perfect holiness (1 John 3:2). When placed on one side of the scale opposite the real sufferings of this present age, there is no comparison. Future glory greatly outweighs present sufferings.

The final connection to be noticed between glory and suffering is that future glory transforms present sufferings. The certainty of glory later makes the burdens of today bearable. Paul elaborates this point in 2 Corinthians. In chapter one he writes of his trials being so great that he “despaired even of life” (8, 9). In chapter four, however, he can speak of his trials as “light” and comparatively insignificant.

He writes, “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:17–18). It is as Paul looks at the unseen, eternal realities with confidence that his present sufferings are working to make his future glory even more glorious that he is able to see those sufferings as “light” and only “for a moment.” The promise of future glory is

so certain and the character of that glory is so overwhelming that present trials are transformed by it.

In this world we will have tribulations, but those tribulations will not have the final say. The suffering that they bring will not destroy us nor do they have to define us. Our Lord endured suffering on the pathway to glory and He enables His followers to do the same. Christians are “heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him” (Romans 8:17).

That future hope gives us present strength to continue the life of faith with joy. ☺

News

Attending the 2010 SBC in Orlando?

Join us for the Founders Fellowship Breakfast with R. C. Sproul on June 15, 2010 in rooms W303A–C on Level 3 of the West Building at the Orange County Convention Center at 6:30 AM. R. C. Tickets are \$20 and include breakfast. Registration closes June 7, 2010.

Register online at: www.founders.org/conferences/ffb/

Want to hear more R. C. Sproul after the SBC?

Plan to stay for the 2010 Ligonier National Conference, Thursday through Saturday, June 17–19 at the Marriott World Center in Orlando, FL. The theme is “Tough Questions Christians Face.” Ligonier is offering a special conference rate of \$50 for those coming to Orlando to attend the SBC. For more information call: 800-435-4343.

Founders Study Center

If you are planning ahead for this fall, take note! The Founders Study Center will be announcing Fall 2010 course offerings on June 11, 2010. Registration for the fall will begin on July 16, 2010. Fall orientation for students will open August 23, 2010; courses begin on September 7, 2010.

The Joy of Paul's Ministry

Rob Ventura and Jeremy Walker

The following article is taken from Chapter One of the forthcoming book, *A Portrait of Paul: Identifying a True Minister of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), and is printed here with permission from the publisher. The book is due out in the fall. All Scripture quotations are from the KJV. For more information, see www.heritagebooks.org

Who now rejoice in my sufferings ... (Colossians 1:24).

“Glory be to God for the furnace, the hammer, and the file. Heaven shall be all the fuller of bliss because we have been filled with anguish here below, and earth shall be better tilled because of our training in the school of adversity” (Charles Spurgeon).¹

For most of us, most of the time, sufferings are assumed to be a time of misery and grief. There are few who can testify in truth, “I now rejoice in my sufferings.” And yet that is the sincere declaration of the Apostle Paul. Joy, even in suffering, is a distinguishing mark of his character and ministry.

The nature of Paul's suffering

What are the sufferings to which Paul refers? They plainly include the sufferings connected with his imprisonment in Rome for preaching the gospel to the Gentiles. Twice Paul mentions his confinement in this letter: in Colossians 4:10 he refers to “Aristarchus my fellowprisoner” and later he calls upon the Colossians to remember his chains (4:18).

Paul is sitting bound in jail. Things are not looking good for him. No doubt he is uncertain about his future. And what does he say? He declares

that even while experiencing this difficult trial, he now rejoices. His language tells us that his rejoicing was a present and ongoing experience, not in spite of his sufferings but rather in them. The caged bird is singing! It would be one thing if Paul managed to rejoice at the onset of his troubles, but then gradually sank into discouragement after having been in them for some time. That makes sense to us, and all too often reflects our own experience. But these are sufferings that are associated with Paul as a minister of Jesus Christ. It is not masochism (“I rejoice because I am suffering”) nor asceticism (“I rejoice in my self-imposed suffering”) nor stoicism (“I rejoice despite my sufferings”). It is a distinctively Christian response to what are, in this instance, distinctively Christian trials and tribulations: it is the joy of a gospel minister in the midst of the sufferings associated with his gospel ministry.

The life of a faithful minister involves suffering, even if not necessarily physical imprisonment and pain. False prophets often win the affection of men; truth speakers will incite evil speech from many. Our Lord warned his disciples, “Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you! for so did their fathers to the false prophets.” (Luke 6:26). Paul’s own call to ministry involved a declaration that he would suffer: “For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name’s sake” (Acts 9:16). Again, before he died Christ urged the disciples to “Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also” (John 15:20). Paul himself warns Timothy that “all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution” (2 Timothy 3:12).

Many of Paul’s sufferings were in his body. Paul asked the Corinthians about the empty “super-apostles” afflicting that church:

Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I am more; in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which comes upon me daily, the care of all the churches (2 Corinthians 11:23–28).

At the same time, those Corinthian super-apostles spent much of their time insinuating and declaring all manner of falsehoods against the

apostle, and those lies were being believed by Paul's own spiritual children (1 Corinthians 4:15). His good was declared to be evil; his sacrifices were called expressions of his worthlessness; his gentleness was called weakness; his humility was called emptiness. He declared himself ready "very gladly [to] spend and be spent for you" and in the same breath delivered this sad testimony: "though the more abundantly I love you, the less I be loved" (2 Corinthians 12:15). The Corinthians flung Paul's love and labors back in his face. There are few things that cause more agony for a minister of Christ than to pour out his soul on behalf of Christ's people, only to have his motives misinterpreted, all kinds of sin imputed to him, and his earnest entreaties and heartfelt efforts ignored, rejected, and even sometimes angrily despised and hurled back against him.

The apostle wrote to the Philippians of certain men who preached Christ from envy and strife as well as those who did so from good will. "The one," said Paul, "preach Christ of contention, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my bonds" (Philippians 1:15–16). While Paul's example of imprisonment for the sake of Jesus had encouraged some to boldness in their witness, some—and we are not sure of their exact identity—preached Christ from flawed motives, intending to undermine Paul's authority, trouble the church, unsettle Paul's soul, and generally aggravate his imprisonment in whatever ways they could. A spirit of faction dominates some who are preaching the Lord Jesus! And yet, Paul rejoices and will rejoice that Christ is preached (Philippians 1:18).

Paul is not untroubled by the condition of the lost: "I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost, that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh" (Romans 9:1–3). This is the language of an abiding trial of soul in which he is constantly distressed by the spiritual condition of the great mass of his own nation. Even when Paul is necessarily opposed to foes of the gospel, he—like his Lord weeping over Jerusalem (Luke 13:34–35)—does so with tears: "For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things" (Philippians 3:18–19). The lostness of the lost, including the present and future distresses of those who set themselves against the Lord and against His Anointed (Psalm 2), cause the apostle genuine grief of soul.

In addition to the physical sufferings he endures, over and above the opposition he faces, loaded on top of the lies told about him, and added to his groaning over the lost, Paul writes of "that which comes upon me daily,

the care of all the churches” (2 Corinthians 11.28). We must recognize here an underpinning reality. As an apostle, Paul had a right to be responsibly concerned for all the churches. This is not a right that extends to ministers today. To be certain, every Christian ought to have an abiding concern for the advance of Christ’s kingdom in every place, but while there may be a similar duty of concern and prayer, there is no identical responsibility of leadership. A faithful pastor ought to have his heart engaged on behalf of the people over whom God has placed him, and will know the burden of concern that weighs down his soul over the struggles, sins, trials and difficulties that afflict the flock. Sitting under his ministry is a man wrestling with arrogance, lust, pride, anger or bitterness. Also there is a woman who is grieving, or proud, or aggressive, or gossiping, or sometimes absent. This family is profoundly dysfunctional; these members are drifting away; those friends have not been seen for some time; that brother is sick; that sister is afflicted in soul; this falsehood has found a toehold in the congregation; this misunderstanding is dividing the brothers. How much care and prayer do these sorrows draw out of his soul? And yet, this is only his flock. He may and should be concerned at the rise of error on the broader scale. There may be brother ministers whose sorrows he shares and who share his sorrows. He may invest in the work of the kingdom on a broader scale through fraternal meetings, conferences, preaching in other congregations and the like. He may have a reputation for wisdom, and find himself sought by others for counsel. And yet, for all that, he has no apostolic authority over multiple churches. He is answerable primarily for the health of the flock over which he has been appointed.

Now imagine that concern legitimately multiplied a hundred times. Imagine the tension between the profound joys and the profound distresses of a man answerable for so many congregations, the weariness of soul and the darkness of mind that sometimes would sweep across him. He is aware of packs of wolves circling many different flocks; he has responsibility to exhort and encourage other under-shepherds; he receives letters and emissaries from various congregations bringing questions, bearing news and seeking counsel. These things constantly demand his attention and lie upon his heart. Daily he feels the distracting anxiety of how things go in the churches for which he bears some responsibility, under God.

We might pause to ponder for a moment the heart of Christ. Here is One whose absolute concern is matched by absolute wisdom and power, who is never overburdened by the concern for all His redeemed that lies constantly upon His heart. He never ceases to pray for us with perfect insight and perfect awareness, offering up to His heavenly Father perfectly framed petitions for just those things which we need. Here is the

great Shepherd of the sheep. While He is the confidence of every under-shepherd, and they labor confident of His ability to bring all His sheep safely home (John 10:28–30), they—like Him—feel deeply the needs and concerns of the sheep.

Whether internal or external, whether on his own behalf or on behalf of others, the suffering of a servant of Christ is real and often brutal. However, the joy associated with such suffering is just as real and unusually sweet. When the apostles had been beaten and commanded not to speak in the name of Jesus “they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name” (Acts 5:41). Peter also urged the saints that they “think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: but rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ’s sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy” (1 Peter 4:12–13). It is the distinctive character and circumstances of this suffering that enable Paul, the other apostles, and those who follow them to rejoice in those sufferings.

Paul’s own response is grounded in a grasp of the truth, for doubtless the thought of Christ’s glory and supremacy sustained him, together with a sense of his own gospel privileges and the honor of his ministry. It is grounded in humility, for there can be no rejoicing in the heart of a man who thinks he deserves far better than what he receives. It is grounded in a right recognition of the value of our sufferings, in the minister’s identification with Christ Himself and in the purpose of the suffering that Christ has undergone and that he is experiencing.

Neither is this statement from the apostle isolated. As we survey other Scriptures describing Paul’s trials, we find that his rejoicing in the midst of difficulties was characteristic of his ministry.

The nature of Paul’s joy

Consider what is recorded in Acts 16. It is midnight. Paul and his fellow laborer Silas are in a dark jail cell, their feet fastened in stocks. Earlier that day, they had been falsely accused of being great troublemakers and of teaching unlawful customs. They had been profoundly distressed by the activity and plight of a demon-possessed slave girl, and had cast a spirit of divination out of her, thus depriving her masters of the profits which they made through her fortune telling. Stirring up the crowd, the girl’s wicked taskmasters incited the magistrates to convict and imprison the apostle and his companion. The judgment included a severe beating with rods: many stripes were laid on them before they were cast into the prison (16:23).

Paul and Silas sit unjustly condemned, their bodies bruised and bleeding. They are unable to move or to discover a position that will lessen the agony. They are locked in a foul prison alongside others who no doubt deserved to be there. If ever a man had reason to resent such unjust treatment, Paul did. But as we peer through the bars on that night, what do we find? “And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them” (16:25).

Paul did not succumb to the temptations presented by this trial. He did not doubt God nor, worse, indict Him. He did not grumble. He was not planning a lawsuit against those who wronged him. Rather, we hear continual prayer being offered up to God. We hear hymns sung to their most worthy Lord penetrating the cells of their fellow prisoners. Are these not expressions of true joy in the midst of brutal affliction? Says G. Campbell Morgan, “Any man can sing when the prison doors are open, and he is set free. The Christian’s soul sings in prison.”² The church father Tertullian is even blunter, asserting that “nothing the limb feels in the stocks when the mind is in heaven.”³

Paul’s response under these rigors tells us volumes about this man and bids us follow him as he also followed Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1). Or consider Paul’s experience recorded in 2 Corinthians 12:7–10. Here we find Paul’s disclosure of the thorn in his flesh:

And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

He described this particular grievance as “a messenger of Satan to buffet me.” Portraying his trial in such terms, Paul was certainly not depicting some trifling inconvenience that was merely a nuisance to him, but rather a source of profound distress. It is no wonder that the apostle pleaded with the Lord repeatedly that this thorn might depart from him. Using words found elsewhere in the context, Paul’s various trials are further described as involving weakness, infirmities, reproaches, needs, persecutions, and distresses suffered for Christ’s sake. Note also that Paul did not enjoy the suffering itself. Instead, he pleaded earnestly and repeatedly that the Lord would remove it from him.

But we ask again: What was Paul's disposition in the midst of this pummeling? We find a wholehearted trust in the sufficiency of God's grace and the manifestation of Christ's strength in Paul's weakness. In Spurgeon's quaint language, we find Paul confident that Christ's ocean of grace is sufficient to fill the teaspoon of his human need (2 Corinthians 12:9). We find Paul not mourning his lack of native strength, but rather gladly boasting in his weakness because he knew that Christ would overrule that frailty with omnipotent power, that the apostle's weakness would provide a platform on which Jesus Christ would display His divine strength. We find Paul taking pleasure in his infirmities, not in the removing of them. The knowledge that when he is weak he is strong in Christ gives him great joy.

One might react strongly to the apostle: "Paul, have you lost your mind? You boast in your infirmities! You take pleasure in your needs! When you are weak, you are strong? What kind of nonsense is this?"

Yet, to use Paul's own words, he certainly is not mad but speaks words of truth and soberness (Acts 26:25). Is not the acknowledgement of weakness a prelude to seeking help? Is not the recognition of God's power, goodness, and faithfulness in Christ to His servants sufficient grounds to appeal for His mighty assistance in every good endeavor? Most assuredly, Paul is eminently sane!

Scripture gives us another example of this characteristic rejoicing in difficulty. The letter to the Philippians was also written from prison, and there we read these words: "Yea, and if I be offered up upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I joy, and rejoice with you all. For the same cause also do ye joy, and rejoice with me" (Philippians 2:17-18).

Paul has been pleading for true unity in the context of church life, a unity which will manifest itself in a biblical like-mindedness, self-sacrificing love, and a lowliness of mind which esteems others better than oneself. Our Lord Jesus Christ supremely exemplified such a mind. Though He is fully God, He is also fully man, yet without sin. If such a glorious Person could take on the form of a bondservant and humble Himself, being obedient even to the extent of suffering His horrific death on the cross, how much more ought His creatures to walk in humble and universal obedience? With this standard, Paul implores his readers to obey God, to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling. And he gives them reason to expect success, because God would be working in the believers both to will and to do for His good pleasure (Philippians 2:12-13). As an effective teacher, Paul then provides concrete examples. Complaining and disputing are not to be heard in any of their activities (Philippians 2:14). Rather, they

are to sustain a tenacious hold on God's word, which is to be the touchstone of all that they do (Philippians 2:16).

Such ongoing faithfulness to the Scriptures would be proof positive that his labors among them were in fact successful. They would demonstrate that the sufferings he was enduring were not in vain, but were being honored by God and used by Him to establish maturing believers who were healthy, functioning members of a local church.

How did Paul regard these trials which he endured as a true servant of Christ? Did they cause him to lose heart? Did his unrelenting difficulties and the prospect of execution pound him down to the point of hopeless discouragement? Did they squeeze bitter complaints or resentment from his lips? No. For, as we see in Philippians 2:17, though the apostle was, as it were, being poured out as a drink offering on behalf of those to whom he ministered, he was glad and rejoiced. He rejoiced in the midst of extremities that would have broken many a man.

We see from these examples that Paul's rejoicing in suffering was no unusual thing for him. Because Paul knew that God is sovereign, that He ordains each of his trials, and works all things together for his good, Paul was joyful under duress (Romans 8:28). This was a notable characteristic of his ministry.

We must ask again how Paul approached these trials. His rejoicing was neither a product of irrational optimism nor humanistic psychology. He did not play mind games with himself or others in some delusional denial of reality. He underwent his trials—pain and all—with his eyes wide open. In each situation, he sought Christ's aid, pouring out his heart in prayer. He kept in view the truths of God's greatness and His sufficiency to overrule seemingly bleak circumstances to His ultimate glory. He had confidence that Christ's grace and strength would carry him through and above his weakness and, therefore, he was able to rejoice. The examples we have considered bear this out. It is not mere positive thinking (i.e. "This is not as bad as I think; I can get through this on my own") that Paul exhibits and that the Scriptures set before us for emulation. It is biblical thinking (i.e. "I am weak. God is almighty and faithful, always true to His Word; I will therefore appeal to Him through Christ, my all sufficient Mediator, for help").

Paul's abiding joy was not contingent upon his circumstances. Rather, it was bound up in the God of all grace who saved him (Philippians 4:10–14; Romans 15:13). Paul's joy was supernatural, produced in him by the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22).

Fellow Christian:

What kind of man do you want as an under-shepherd? The apostle was a man whose thoughts and emotions were anchored in Christ and His truth. He knew himself—who and what he was—and he knew his God. This provided the foundation for a stable joy in the face of even profoundly painful circumstances of body and soul.

When you consider a man to minister God's Word to you, look for one who embraces Paul's attitude toward suffering for Christ's sake, even if he does not measure up to Paul either in the degree of his suffering or in the excellence of his response. Let him not be a man whose mission in life is the avoidance of suffering. He cannot be a faithful minister if he will sacrifice anything and everything to avoid pains and persecutions from within and without the professing church, from burdens and griefs in his own soul.

Neither let him be a man devoid of stable joy rooted in the person and work of his Savior. By this, of course we do not mean a man with a forced grin fixed on his face, as if persuaded that the number of teeth he shows is a register of his happiness. We do not mean a pulpit clown, or a man with a talent for one-liners, or even possessed of a rich and ripe sense of humor (though we hope he has that). This is not about the constitution of a man, but the conviction of a man. A man may have a constitutional inclination to mirth and happiness, and still demonstrate an aversion to or an absence of Christian joy. The faithful minister must be one whose joy is the joy of serving Christ and his church in fair weather or foul.

As you reflect on his character and qualifications, ask whether the object of your interest glories in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance, and perseverance, character, and character, hope (Romans 5:3–4). Does he rejoice in his sufferings, knowing that God always has his best in view, trusting that God will sustain him (1 Corinthians 10:13)? Does he trust in God at all times, pouring out his heart before Him, confident that God is his refuge (Psalm 68:2)?

Ask him how he responds to trials and distresses. Observe those responses, if you can. Is he a whiner and complainer? When the going gets tough, a minister like Paul looks to the Lord, from whom comes his help, saying with the psalmist, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes" (Psalm 119:71). He does not whine with Cain that "my punishment is greater than I can bear" (Genesis 4:13).

What of your present pastor? Is he trying to be such a man? If he is seeking to be faithful to Christ and his flock, you might not be able to pray him out of suffering, but you can certainly ask God to give him a humble

spirit and an uplifted heart in that suffering. You should ask whether or not you may be the cause of some of his griefs and trials. Do not make it your job in life to provide scope for his greater sanctification: “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you” (Hebrews 13.17). If he finds pain elsewhere, let your conduct and attitude be the ground of joy, that—even should there be legitimate difference between you—you respond in a thoroughly Christian spirit.

Fellow pastor:

Are you ready to suffer? We do not ask you to invite or even pursue suffering, but to remember that everyone who desires to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution (2 Timothy 3:12). If we are faithful, suffering will come.

If you set out to be, and increasingly become, a man who lives godly in Christ Jesus, then persecution will be yours. Like Paul, you may face false accusations, rejections and resistance from within and without the church. You may face opposition from civil and religious authorities. You may even find yourself threatened physically, and those threats at time carried into actions.

In addition, there will be profound burdens of soul that you will undergo. The more you love your people, the more their pains and griefs will become yours. The more you love them, the more their sins and struggles will trouble you. The more you love them, the more you will pray for them and visit them. The more you love them, the more constrained you will be to address those sins and struggles graciously and tenderly though firmly and plainly. You will see men and women who hear the gospel over and over again and who seem to grow more careless, whose soul-damning indifference will cause you agonies in your own spirit.

The more you love Christ, the more zealous you will be for His glory, the more concerned you will be for His honor. You will be grieved when false teaching besmirches Him, and grieved when true saints wander from Him. You will be distressed when He is unloved and disregarded; you will be moved to tears and to holy indignation when His truth is denied, His worship tainted, His church assaulted, and His person dishonored.

You will, if you love Christ and His people, feel and pray and respond and act for the glory of the Savior’s name and the health of His body, the church. And you may well have it all flung back in your face.

There will be those who love to have the preeminence who will not

receive you, and who will find a hundred seeming reasons to hang upon the hook of their resistance to you. There will be those who will despise your youth, whether or not you give them reason to do so. For others, the problem may be that you are too old, and therefore behind the times. There will be men who think that they deserve greater prominence, and wives who think the same of their husbands, irrespective of their graces and gifts, and perhaps even as an avenue for their own domineering spirit. There will be those persuaded that they are called to lead who show no inclination to serve. There will be those who are angered by every attempt to call them individually, or the church corporately, to repentance and reformation, who will resist every charge to consider their ways, and turn their feet back to God's testimonies (Psalm 119:59).

You will find hurting sheep so maddened by pain and worry and grief that they barely know themselves, sheep who will buck and kick the moment you press your fingers into their wool. Your probing shepherd's fingers may find old wounds that were never washed and cleaned, old breaks that never properly set, diseases and afflictions and infections that have been allowed to fester over years by neglectful even if well-intentioned pastors. Others will bear the scars of false teaching and cruelty. You will determine to deal with those things, and you may be surprised and even horrified to hear a sheep snarl and even bite.

You will seek by all means to advance the cause of truth, and call the church of Christ back to the old paths, the good way where there is rest for the soul (Jeremiah 6:16). You will find good men and women so entrenched in tradition or so molded by worldly principles that they will resist you with all their might. For such, all change is to be shunned, and they have no intention of being stirred from their slumber, even if the body grows cold and the mind numb and the soul careless and the world is being lost.

Do not say, "It will never happen to me." Remember the sad experience of Jonathan Edwards, that great preacher and theologian. Under God he had been blessed with laboring at the forefront of genuine revivals of religion. The church to which he ministered had been faithfully and lovingly served by him for twenty-three years, and God had used him as the means of great blessing to many (three quarters of the membership had been admitted by Edwards). There came a point when Edwards took a stand on a matter of principle. The fundamental issue was Edwards' refusal to allow to the Lord's table professing Christians whose lives fell short of their profession. The eventual outcome was the separation of Edwards and the church that he had served, and the removal of the pastor and his fam-

ily to the remote outpost of Stockbridge. There Edwards put his talents to use in what was, by the standards of the time, a far meaner and less worthy sphere of service in which he faced intense opposition.⁴

Are you ready for such a life, brother? By all means, it is not all or always like this, but this—in part or in whole—will be the portion of every man who seeks to shepherd a church with faithfulness and love. Again, we read the testimonies of the past and sometimes we imagine that men greatly used by God sailed serenely through life, without, above or unaware of the abuses flung against them. That is an utterly false perspective. There is a Christ-like pattern, a through-suffering-to-glory trajectory, which every faithful child of God undergoes. There is no crown without a cross and—far from being exempt from such a principle—the minister of Christ is often called to show these things in himself first.

That is the reality of the suffering a faithful elder must be prepared to face. But the joy is equally real and overwhelmingly excellent.

How much joy do we find in the midst of difficulty? Are there periods when, though sorrowful, we are always rejoicing (2 Corinthians 6:10)? Can we say—if not now perfectly, at least with increasing understanding and conviction—with Paul in Romans 8:18 that we “reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us”? Paul could say to the believers in Thessalonica, “And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost” (1 Thessalonians 1:6). Can you?

These are matters which do and should search our hearts. We must face these questions before the Lord, asking him to try us and know our ways (Psalm 139:23–24). Paul knew that his best life was not now, but is rather the life to come. Thus he could confidently say, “For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, works for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” (2 Corinthians 4:16–17). Paul knew that “if we suffer, we shall also reign with him” (2 Timothy 2:12); suffering with Him leads to our being glorified together with Him (Romans 8:17). With this expectation he could say in Philipians 4:4, “Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice.”

The joy of the faithful pastor is centered in Christ. If the Master is preached, exalted, known and glorified, then the servant is more than content—he rejoices. If your joy is grounded in your own reputation, then it will rise and—mainly!—fall with your honor in the world, which honor will never amount to much if you are faithful to your Lord. If it is tied to

the apparent prosperity of your ministry, it may prove changeable as the sea and can even be snatched away entirely in an instant. If it has its roots in circumstance, it will crumble when you most need to manifest that joy for Christ's glory.

We will suffer, but when we do we must turn to Christ Jesus, and make our complaints known to Him. Our sovereign God is possessed of enough wisdom and power to turn our most desperate needs and our direst straits into occasions for our sanctification and the church's blessing and—above all—Christ's glory. Is Christ weaker now than He was in the days of the apostles? Is He less loving or less gracious?

We do not need then to whip ourselves up, or even to be always gazing for the silver linings to the darkest clouds. We are not promised that we shall see those things, but we know that they must be there, even when hidden from our eyes. We are weak, but Christ is strong and faithful to the end. We can rejoice in knowing Him and doing His will even when all things seem against us, to drive us to despair. His ear is open to our cry; His eye is set upon His people; His heart is entirely for us; His own hand will bring Him the victory.

May the Lord give those of us who are ministers of Christ much grace to embrace this perspective from the heart. 🌸

Notes:

¹ Charles H. Spurgeon, "The Minister's Fainting Fits" in *Lectures To My Students* (Edinburgh, UK/Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2008), 191.

² Quoted in William MacDonald, *The Believer's Bible Commentary*, ed. Art Farstad (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1980), 1636.

³ Quoted in R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), 672.

⁴ See chapters 16 through 21 of Iain H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburgh/Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1987) for more detail on this period of Edwards' life.

God's Enabling Grace In the Path of Suffering

Roger D. Duke

The following article is taken from Chapter One of the forthcoming book, *Reason for the Season: Ministerial Reflections on Personal Grief, Suffering and Loss* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2010). The book is due out this summer. For more information on titles by Founders Press, see www.founderspress.com

When the idea for the book *Reason for the Season* was first conceived, it was like most of God's work done in the lives and hearts of Christ's followers. It had a beginning and a continuation process, but the outcomes are generally unknown to us and only known to our Sovereign Lord. In the midst of any catastrophic issue comes many life questions that the theologians and philosophers from time immemorial have been unable to answer adequately. The main one of these is the "Why?" When these times of catastrophe come—as they surely will—it is natural and normal to begin a long and deep introspection process. This reflection is sure to become more acute especially for one who would become a "fully devoted follower of Jesus Christ."¹

In times of introspection we all parse out the "why" question into many other of its component parts. We want to assign blame! We want to find a reason! We want to know the cause for the predicament where we presently find ourselves! More times than not, we must come to grip with the fact that whether we want to admit it, some of the issues may lie within us. In this quagmire of doubt and self examination, we long to find who we are—really are. Howard Thurman, in his *For the Inward Journey*, gave some helpful insight that could encourage the questioner. He stated: "The desire to be one's self is ever present. Equally persistent is the tendency to locate the responsibility for the failure to be one's true self in events, per-

sons, and conditions—all of which are outside and beyond one’s self.”² This self-examination, or search “to be one’s self” will be a major consideration of this short essay.

This reflection will be governed by three dynamics. First, I will reflect on our son’s condition and how it has impacted my ministerial and wider life. Secondly, Howard Thurman’s volume, *For the Inward Journey: The Writings of Howard Thurman*, will be employed because of its devotional and lasting personal impact. Thirdly, Robert Mulholland’s “Definition of Spiritual Formation”³ will serve as a reflective lens through which these thoughts have passed as this work was composed.

Personal Ministry Formation

I was really young when I was “called” into the ministry. I was not so much young in age as I was in maturity and idealism. I had no idea what I would be facing when we left Nashville, Tennessee on January 1, 1982 to come to Memphis to attend Mid America Baptist Theological Seminary. And I certainly had no understanding how it would impact my wife, who was six months pregnant at the time, and our two year old daughter. I had been trained as a union pipefitter, steamfitter, and welder. This thing of seminary was altogether new to me. Could I do the rigorous work that Mid America demanded? That remained to be seen.

In the midst of the stresses and strains of balancing family and seminary life—typing academic papers, taking tests, tackling the lack of money, preaching on the weekends, working seemingly never-ending menial jobs to provide for the family—there was the surprise of a second seminary baby. Roger (Dale) Duke, Jr. was born on June 30, 1983. Although he was a “Jr.,” he was called by our common middle name in order to preserve his own identity.

My wife and I were completely immersed in this new-to-us thing called “the ministry.” As I moved through Mid America’s Diploma of Theology (later renamed Associate of Divinity) program, God began to move in my heart that I should go on and further my education. So the tedium previously described above seemed to go on endlessly. I would go as a candidate to churches seeking to call a pastor, and there would be nothing to come of the preached “trial sermon” or pastoral interview. I worked part time jobs but eventually found a full time job in order for us to live and pay the bills. I even found a small country church where I could preach and minister on the weekends. All the while I held to the conviction that real academic education was a goal and end for the ultimate God would have me do.

During the hustle and bustle of these first days of ministry and education, my dear wife was a real “soldier of the cross.” She never once complained about our financial or ministerial circumstances or the long-haul educational road that lay ahead for us both. Because I had no prior academic preparation, it would take at least ten to fifteen years to complete my master’s and doctoral work. It was during these early days that we began to have problems with Dale’s health. Linda has a wonderful mind and great powers of observation. She is trained as a scientist and worked for years in medical research at Vanderbilt University. She began to sense, as well as see, that something was fundamentally wrong with this our third child. I might add that this was the boy-child that every man wants so desperately to have. At about the age of six months he was not sitting up as he should and also not doing other things that his two sisters had done at the same age.

This is when Linda and I began the arduous task of having him examined, evaluated and shuttled from doctor to doctor. This seems, in retrospect, that it was a never-ending process. What made it so much more acute were the facts concerning his myriad of diagnoses. In the physical and psychological evaluations it was discovered that he had a small brain. This bears the technical medical name of *micro-cephaly*. He was also developmentally delayed, as Linda had surmised. He was hypo-tonic in muscle tone and development. They also told us that he was mentally retarded. In the midst of these “medical guesses” as I have learned to refer to them, one of the teams of doctors and psychologists told us the worst possible news—news that I can hardly repeat even now because the depth of pain! Still! We were told that he had a degenerative brain disorder that would eventually take his young life.

In the twenty five years following, Dale has had around 15 surgeries for various and sundry issues—so many episodes and surgeries that it is hard to remember them through the haze of age. In retrospect, I truly wish that I had kept a journal or diary. No doubt, those remembrances would have been precious now. He had so many hospital stays and nearly died on numerous occasions. We are blessed at the time of this writing that we have not had a life-threatening “event” for some four years. But there will always be another chapter to be written concerning his life and care.

As you can imagine, this news devastated us. The severity of the totality of these circumstances would henceforth form us ministerially, vocationally, emotionally and familiarly. I began learning one major thing during those long and dark days at the first of Dale’s health issues. I share this with the “Spiritual Aspects of Care” classes I regularly teach at Baptist College of Health Sciences. In this class we investigate the dynamics

and connections between the body and spiritual components of persons in times of grief and suffering. I argue that the body cannot be affected without the inner person—the spiritual person—also having repercussions at some level. What I share is very simple indeed and yet so very profound: There is an inseparable symbiosis between the inner person and the outer person. We truly are physical as well as spiritual beings that together make up the whole. Then I warn my students. Never tell your patient that you know or understand how s/he feels. You do not! You cannot possibly know how they feel at a given point in time. But through all of those feelings of *denial, anger, bargaining, depression* there finally came some level of *acceptance*.⁴ It did for us.

Robert Mulholland: A Definition of Spiritual Formation

One of the main problems I had in the beginning of my call and preparation for ministry was the lack of understanding God's way of doing things long-term. It seems He was not concerned with time and issues surrounding that context as much as we (I am) are. For me to go through and then seemingly go through again and again, the health issues with Dale was more than just a little disconcerting. When all this began I was young and ready to go! Give me something to do and I would do it in straight order! Even in my perpetual degree-seeking process, I only needed to know where the next school was, what the next degree was, who the next professor was, what the next assignment was, what were the next books I had to buy, and how do I finance it all. I was in "attack mode" throughout those years.

But God is in the process mode and not the punctilliar mode. He knows that we, as humans, take much time to change. He also knows that that change comes slowly and incrementally for us. We are much more like the Queen Elisabeth II luxury liner which takes much time and lumbers along, rather than a ski boat that darts and turns about quickly. More than likely, we spent a great deal of time getting here—like the QE II, and it is going to take a great deal of time for us to get out of our present predicament. It is the process of the time taken that forms our character. Character is formed in a very, very slow process. For some of us, more than others, it takes a lifetime. There are those followers of Christ who are "quick studies." But I am not one of those. I am confident that I would not, nor could not, have learned what little that I have learned without the grace of God working through this long and drawn-out process of Dale's health issues.

Part of Mulholland's definition, that of *being conformed to the image*

of Christ, is found right in the middle of one of the most wonderfully perplexing passages of Scripture in all of the New Testament. Here the Apostle Paul wrote: “And we know that all things work together for good, to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose” (KJV). This is the midst of the context of Paul’s “Five Golden Links of Salvation”—foreknowledge, predestination, calling, justification and glorification. It is not our concern here to deal with this issue theologically. However, the idea of being conformed to the image of Christ seems to be set in the midst of what God is doing from eternity past into eternity future; i.e., the changing of the believer into the character of His dear Son—our Lord Christ. Suffering is bound to come. And it comes for different reasons. We all suffer. The Scriptures also declare in Job 5:7: “Yet man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward” (KJV).

The reasons for humanity’s suffering vary greatly. We suffer because of our personal sin and rebellion. We suffer because of the sin and rebellion of others. We suffer because of foolishness and lack of wisdom. We suffer from the results of bad choices. Someone might have a history of a certain disease in his family. They know they should take better care of their health as far as what they eat, exercise, or other personal lifestyle habits. But for whatever reason, they do not follow a good course of health for themselves. Wars come. Young men go off to fight and come home in metal caskets. We get old. Sickesses unto death come, and suffering attends the sicknesses. Sometimes is it not a “sickness unto death.” Sometimes it is a debilitating disease with all of its complications and sufferings. And sometimes a child is born with some measure of disability. In some extreme cases someone may even have to suffer persecution or martyrdom for the Master. But through each and every form of suffering, seemingly caused or uncaused, the follower of Christ will suffer. John Piper declares concerning the Christian’s suffering:

If we would see God honored in the lives of our people as the supreme value, highest treasure, and deepest satisfaction of their lives, then we must strive with all out might to show the meaning of suffering, and help them see the wisdom and power and goodness of God behind it ordaining; above it governing; beneath it sustaining; and before it preparing. This is the hardest work in the world—to change the minds and hearts of fallen human beings; and make God so precious to them that they count if all joy when trials come, and exult in their afflictions, and rejoice in the plundering of the property, and say in the end, “To die is gain.”⁵

I was once blessed to hear a sermon by Rev. Don Moore, former Ex-

ecutive-Secretary for The Arkansas (Southern Baptist) State Convention. In this sermon, Dr. Moore stated an alternative definition of grace that I had not encountered before. He said that grace was, “God’s merciful enabling.”⁶ That concept was very interesting to me. Moore went on to state the case that by the same grace that we had been converted, it was the self-same grace that we were to be empowered to live the Christian life.⁷ God had not left us alone unto our own devices. But, how is it that this grace comes to the believer? What does this grace look like? How will I know I have this merciful enabling by God for the job or circumstance at hand?

Once again, we can look at Mulholland’s definition for guidance. He states that what God does is done by “the gracious working of God’s Spirit.” As I have grown (although somewhat slowly and awkwardly at times), I have learned that God is not necessarily concerned with what is going on outside of me. But he is more concerned with what is going on within me. I am not saying that God is not sovereign and in complete control of all of life’s circumstances. What I am saying is that for the person to whom some external issue has caused them some great difficulty, or sickness, or trauma, or even death, God knows and cares. But there is a “greater weight of glory” that Paul talks about. That greater weight has to do with the character formation of His children. That is where “the gracious working of God’s Spirit” comes to bear on the follower of Christ.

One of the great questions the philosophers and theologians have asked since time immemorial is “WHY?” All of the world religions, all major philosophical “schools of thought,” all Christian theological systems, and every single human being of every hue who ever lived has pondered evil, suffering and grief. It does not seem to have an answer. But the Christian knows that if we cling to our relationship with Christ that we can be changed internally in and through whatever external circumstance we might be called to suffer for the Savior. The great Apostle Paul, the great apostle to the Gentiles declared: “Therefore, we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day” (NIV).⁸ The mature Christian also knows that God has a work to do in the world.

Probably more times than not, external circumstances—evil, suffering, grief, or loss—are used of the Father to work in us a conformation to the image and character of His dear son, Christ Jesus. We are then changed, as it were, from the outside in. Then we can be used as tools for His greater purposes as change agents for the *transformation of the world*.⁹ It would appear that many (I dare not say most), never get over or get out of the blame they cast upon God their Heavenly Father. They are left bereft of a sense of His love and power and grace in their lives. How hardly do we see

someone who recovers and goes on to be involved in this transformation of the world that Mulholland has captured in this succinct definition. The old black preacher declared in his sermon on Job: “God gives (or allows) these things to come to us to make us *better—not bitter!*” [this writer’s emphasis] There is something in the world God wants done, and He wants us to be instruments of His transformation power.

Wise and Sure Words

As I have wrestled over the years for some knowledge and consolation in my own spiritual formation journey, I have read extensively in spirituality and devotional readings of many in church history—Calvin, Luther, Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, John Bunyan, Chrysostom, Oswald Chambers, St. Thomas, Charles Spurgeon, et al. All of these have all been “friends” as I have sought answers. One of the most moving devotionals in my own experience has no doubt been John Chrysostom and his commentary on Zechariah 13:9. There the Scriptures declare: “And I . . . will refine them as silver is refined, and will try them as gold is tried: they shall call on my name, and I will hear them; I will say, it is my people; and they shall say, The Lord is my God.”

Chrysostom observed concerning the text:

Refiners throw pieces of gold into the furnace to be tested and purified by the fire. In the same way, God allows human souls to be tested by troubles until they can become pure, transparent, and have profited greatly from the process. Therefore, this is the greatest advantage we have. So then, we shouldn’t be disturbed or discouraged when trials happen to us. For if refiners know how long to leave a piece of gold in the furnace, and when to draw it out, if they don’t allow it to remain in the fire until it is burnt up and destroyed, how much better does God understand this process! When He sees that we have become more purer, He frees us from our trials so that we won’t be crushed and defeated by them. Therefore, we shouldn’t retreat or lose heart when unexpected things happen to us. Instead, we should submit to the One who knows best and will test our hearts by fire as He likes. He does this for a reason and for the good of those who are tried.¹⁰

Through all of this there is one thing that I am learning to be absolutely sure and true. This is the same life lesson that Job learned throughout his trials and tribulations: “Lesson #1—God is God! Lesson #2—I am not!”¹¹

Concluding Reflections

Turning once again to Howard Thurman's *For the Inward Journey*, I find words that soothe an old tired soul and allow me to have a sense of peace in my own personal journey. Thurman wrote:

Thomas a Kempis reminds us that in the nature of life, and man's experience in it, that there be what he calls "war and affliction." This is not a note of pessimism or futility—it is rather recognition that conflict [grief and suffering]¹² is a part of the life process. Again and again in the struggle a man may experience failure, but he must know for himself even though such is his experience, the final word has not been spoken.... Mr. Valliant-for-Truth in [Bunyan's] *Pilgrim's Progress* says, "My sword I give to him that shall succeed me in my pilgrimage, and my courage and skill to him that can get it. My marks and my scars I carry with me, to be a witness for me that I have fought His battle who will be my rewarder."¹³

Grief, suffering, war, loss and conflict are all the plight of humans it seems. But how do we deal with them? How do we respond? How should the "fully devoted follower of Christ" react? Should we not respond in a supernatural way? Or even on another plane altogether? We do suffer! That is true. But Paul declares in his first epistle to the Thessalonians that they were to respond in hope: "But I would not have you to be ignorant brethren... that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope."¹⁴ This hope is not only that which looks forward to the resurrection. It is that hope that empowers us and teaches us of Christ's way in the "here and the now!" It is actually one of the many internal dynamics that the Holy Spirit employs for use as a means for conforming us to the Father's beloved Son—Christ Jesus.

Many, many years ago at a Bible conference, even before I knew the Lord was moving in my heart to follow Him in the ministry, I heard a song. It was a song that gripped my heart and has become my "journey prayer" of sorts. I was foolish enough to pray the song as a prayer and have on some level ever since. I share this prayer now as an indicator of what I think it means to follow Christ on our journey fully, devotedly, and completely—not that I have attained! The song is "Whatever it Takes" by Lanny Wolfe:

There's a voice calling me
From an old rugged tree
And He whispers, "Draw closer to Me"

Leave this world far behind
There are new heights to climb
And a new place in me You will find.”

For whatever it takes to draw closer to You,
Lord, that’s what I’ll be willing to do.
For whatever it takes to be more like You
That’s what I’ll be willing to do.

Take the dearest things to me,
If that’s how it must be
To draw me closer to Thee
Let the disappointments come,
Lonely days without the sun,
If through sorrow more like You I’ll become.

For whatever it takes to draw closer to You,
Lord, that’s what I’ll be willing to do.
For whatever it takes to be more like You
That’s what I’ll be willing to do.

Take my houses and lands
Change my dreams, change my plans
For I’m placing my whole life in Your hands
And if you call me today
To a place far away
Lord I’ll go and Your will obey.

For whatever it takes to draw closer to You,
Lord, that’s what I’ll be willing to do.
For whatever it takes to be more like You
That’s what I’ll be willing to do.

I’ll trade sunshine for rain
Comfort for pain—
That’s what I’ll be willing to do
For whatever it takes for my will to break
That’s what I’ll be willing to do
That’s what I’ll be willing to do!¹⁵

The totality and sum of all these issues for me lies in a statement from Albert Mohler. Mohler said: “There is much we do not understand. As Charles Spurgeon explained, when we cannot trace God’s hand, we must simply trust His heart.”¹⁶ ☺

Notes:

¹ Sam Shaw, “Our Goal is to Lead All Peoples to Become Fully Devoted Followers of Christ,” Germantown Baptist Church, Germantown, TN, 1998–2006. This was one of Germantown Baptist Church’s core values adopted under Shaw’s tenure of pastoral leadership.

² Howard Thurman, *For the Inward Journey: The Writings of Howard Thurman* (Richmond, ID: Friends United Press, 2002), 85.

³ Robert Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 15–17. Mulholland defined Spiritual Formation: “Spiritual formation is the process of being conformed to the image of Christ by the gracious working of God’s Spirit, for the transformation of the world.”

⁴ For a fuller discussion of the “Kubler-Ross’s Stages of Grief” Theory see: Myers, D. *Psychology*, Fourth Edition (New York: Worth Publishing), 143.

⁵ John Piper, “Preaching to Suffering People,” *Feed My Sheep: A Passionate Plea for Preaching* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2002), 242–243.

⁶ Don Moore, quote taken from a sermon given at the annual Greater Life Evangelism conference (G.L.E.A.). The G.L.E.A. conference was the home coming Bible conference held by Evangelist Sam T. Cathey and hosted by the Grand Avenue Baptist Church, Fort Smith, AR, for Cathey’s Board of Advisors and supporters. This quote is remembered vividly by the author and has had a great influence in his personal life in the years hence. The quote was *circa* 1981.

⁷ See Ephesians 2:8–10.

⁸ See Paul’s entire confession in 2 Corinthians 4:16–18.

⁹ See citation 3 above, Mulholland’s definition of Spiritual Formation.

¹⁰ Christopher D. Hudson, J. Alan Sharrer, and Lindsay Vanker, eds., “Tested by Fire” by John Chrysostom, in *Day by Day with the Early Church Fathers: Selected Readings for Daily Reflection* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 13.

¹¹ This is a little axiom that I employ when I have students in the Religion 302, *Spiritual Aspects of Care* class, at the Baptist College of Health Sciences, read the Old Testament Book of Job.

¹² Essayist’s Interpolation.

¹³ Thurman, *For the Inward Journey*, 59.

¹⁴ See 1 Thessalonians 4:13. It is clear from the passage that Paul is here discussing the “hope of the resurrection.” But there is no doubt that this self-same hope expressed by the believers concerning Christ’s resurrection and their own bodily resurrection can be appropriated for the ongoing grinds of this life of grief, suffering, and the spiritual formation these can cause.

¹⁵ Lanny Wolfe, “That’s What I’ll Be Willing To Do,” taken from electronic source <http://preciouslordtakemyhand.com/publish/christianhymns/whatever-it-takes>, 20 February 2009.

¹⁶ R. Albert Mohler, “The Goodness of God and the Reality of Evil,” commentary by R. Albert Mohler, Jr., taken from electronic source http://www.albertmohler.com/commentary_print.php?cdate=2005-08-30, 3 February 2009.

On Holding Loved Ones Loosely

Kalb Stevenson

In late November, 1860, the valley of Risca in South Wales was visited by a terrible calamity when hundreds of lives were suddenly lost following an explosion in one of the region's mines. The entire valley was thrust into a state of consternation and grief. Two weeks later, one of church history's greatest preachers, would step to the front of Exeter Hall in Strand, London, England to address a solemn congregation still in mourning for these miners and their families.¹

Charles Spurgeon, the "prince of preachers", who throughout his life had so passionately expounded and defended biblical truth from the pulpit in his home church of New Park Street Chapel in London, was on *this* day called upon by God to communicate a hopeful reminder of His unending love through the gospel of Jesus Christ before the gathering at Exeter Hall at a time of heartbreak and emotional distress. It was an exceptionally emotional moment for him because he had, on prior occasion, been accustomed to spending a few days in the valley for rest and relaxation. Spurgeon knew these Welsh miners and their families, and he had spent time with many of them. Many were, in fact, a faithful group of believers and his Christian brethren. Spurgeon was, therefore, deeply affected by this tragic event that had transpired some 150 miles away. He carried a heavy burden with him as he stepped forward to preach, but he would afterwards refer to his sermon as specially blessed by God to those souls. His text for that morning came from the words of the prophet Jeremiah.

Suddenly are my tents spoiled, and my curtains in a moment (Jeremiah 4:20b, KJV).

Spurgeon began his sermon by recalling the strong faith of his friends in Risca and the tragedy that had occurred in the preceding days.

Well doth my soul remember one night, which I shall never forget in time or in eternity, when, crowded together in the place of worship,

hearty Welsh miners responded to every word of Christ's minister... encouraging me to preach the gospel, and crying "Glory to God" while the message was proclaimed. I remember how they constrained me, and kept me well nigh to midnight, preaching three sermons, one after another, almost without rest, for they loved to listen to the gospel. God was present with us, and many a time has the baptismal pool been stirred since then by the fruit of that night's labour. Nor shall I ever forget when standing in the open air beneath God's blue sky, I addressed a mighty gathering within a short distance of that spot; when the Spirit of God was poured upon us, and men and women were swayed to and fro under the heavenly message, as the corn is moved in waves by the summer winds. Great was our joy that day when the people met together in thousands, and with songs and praises separated to their homes, talking of what they had heard. But now our visitation of that neighbourhood must ever be mingled with sorrow. How hath God been pleased to smite down strong men, and to take away the young men upon a sudden! "How suddenly are my tents spoiled, and my curtains in a moment." Oh! vale of Risca, I take up a lamentation for thee: the Lord hath dealt sorely with thee. Behold, and see if there be sorrow in any valley like unto thy sorrow which is done unto thee. The angel of death has emptied out his quiver upon thee; the awful reaper hath gathered to himself full sheaves from thy beautiful valley.

You all know the story; it scarce needs that I should tell it to you. Last Saturday week some two hundred or more miners descended in health and strength to their usual work in the bowels of the earth. They had not been working long, their wives and their children had risen, and their little ones had gone to their schools, when suddenly there was heard a noise at the mouth of the pit;—it was an explosion,—all knew what it meant. Men's hearts failed them, for well they prophesied the horror which would soon reveal itself. They wait awhile, the foul gas must first be scattered, brave men with their lives in their hands descend into the pit, and when they are able to see with the dim miner's lamp, the light falls upon corpse after corpse. A few, a handful are brought up alive, and scarce alive, but yet, thank God, with enough of the vital spark remaining to be again kindled to a flame; but the great mass of those strong men have felt the grip of death. Some of them were brought up to the top with their faces burned and scarred, with their bodies disfigured by the fire; but many are discovered whose faces looked as if they sweetly slept, so that it was scarcely possible to believe that they really could be dead, so quietly had the spirit quitted the habitation of clay.

What burden must have been laid upon the hearts of the families of those poor Welsh miners. In an instant the wives, children and parents

of those men were left widowed, fatherless and childless. The picture of a father, one evening tucking his small child into bed and the next being entirely and eternally absent from the home stirs up deep and somber feelings. The thought of a faithful and beloved wife in one moment enjoying the gentle company of her husband, but in the next learning of the terrible fate that had befallen him is much to bear. In an instant the realization of those family members who are still physically alive is that their family's rock and foundation will not walk through that front door tonight—nor on any other night. For those children, the soothing presence of fatherly love will no longer reside at the dinner table. There will be no more bedtime stories. No more weekend play time in the yard. No more kisses or hugs. He has passed into eternity, and only emptiness remains in his stead.

How does one begin to survive, let alone cope with such an event, and how can one prepare one's own heart for such future events? Spurgeon provides an intriguing explanation as in his sermon. The answer, he reveals, lies in holding our loved ones loosely, for they are dying things.

We have not a single relative who may not become to us within the next moment a fountain of grief. All that are dear and precious to us are only here by God's good pleasure. What should we be today if it were not for those whom we love, and who love us? What were our house without its little prattlers? What were our habitation without the wife of our bosom? What were our daily business without our associates and friends to cheer us in our trials? Ah! This were a sad world indeed, if the ties of kindred, of affection, and of friendship all be snapped; and yet it is such a world that they must be sundered, and may be divided at any moment.

From the fact that sudden bereavements are possible—not only to ministers and to women whose husbands are upon the sea, but to us also—I would that we would learn profitable lessons. *And first let us learn to set loose by our dearest friends that we have on earth. Let us love them—love them we may, love them we should—but let us always learn to love them as dying things.* Oh, build not thy nest on any of these trees, for they are all marked for the axe. [emphasis added]

In today's modern age, Spurgeon's words could easily be chided as seeming insensitive in a time of mourning. But were Spurgeon's words really unfeeling or devoid of any relative sense of familial love and affection in this moment? No. In fact, they could not be, for he loved his own wife and children deeply. Could Spurgeon have simply been naïve in that he had never undergone a personal tragedy of his own? No, this also was not the case. In fact, the opposite was true. In October, 1856, tragedy stuck

Charles Spurgeon personally as he was preaching to his congregation at the Surrey Gardens Music Hall for the first time. This new venue had come out of necessity for his church's corporate gatherings because his popularity had swelled in London at that time due to newspaper publicity, as well as controversy. Surrey's three galleries were filled from floor to ceiling to hear Spurgeon that morning. Hundreds were coming to Christ in those days, and Spurgeon found himself in the midst of revival. Yet, as the service began and Spurgeon was engaged in prayer, someone in the crowd yelled, "Fire!". This was soon followed by other exclamations of impending danger from around the hall and people panicked. The ensuing stampede left several dead and Spurgeon emotionally devastated.² Following the hysteria, it was determined that there was, in actuality, no fire at all. It was presumed that Spurgeon's critics had concocted the rouse in an attempt to interrupt and distract from the preaching of the gospel. The event brought about a sobering influence on Spurgeon's life, and for years he struggled against depression and spoke of being moved to tears for no reason known to himself.

Since Spurgeon was familiar with the deep bonds of love that existed within his own family, and since he was not naïve with respect to personal tragedy, what could he have meant by learning "to set loose" our dear ones in view of this new tragedy in Risca? His continuation develops the thought further.

"Set not thine affections on things on earth," for the things of earth must leave thee, and then what wilt thou do when thy joy is emptied, and the golden bowl which held thy mirth shall be dashed to pieces? Love first and foremost Christ; and when thou lovest others, still love them not as though they were immortal. Love not clay as though it were undying—love not dust as though it were eternal. So hold thy friend that thou shalt not wonder when he vanishes from thee; so view the partakers of thy life that thou wilt not be amazed when they glide into the land of spirits. See thou the disease of mortality on every cheek, and write not *Eternal* upon the creature of an hour.

Spurgeon's exhortation both to the residents of Risca and to us today is to hold our loved ones with a *loose* embrace here on earth. In all honesty, these words were painful to my heart upon first reading this sermon. My immediate reaction was perhaps, a normal one for a husband and a father who is deeply in love with his wife and children. It is heartbreak. Why would I hold my dear ones with a *loose* embrace when I am so *fond* of them and so very much in *love* with them? I rejoice in holding them close

to my heart—their smiles, hugs, kisses, and the wonderful times we share together. How or why would I or anyone else ever want to hold such dear ones *loosely*?

Taking a step back to examine some of Jesus' words in Luke's Gospel may help to improve our understanding of the premise that underpins Spurgeon's message here.

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:26, ESV).

Like Jesus, Charles Spurgeon did not call for a substantial change in the *amount of love* or the *type of relationship* we already enjoy with our loved ones. In fact, we are never instructed to love them less. Rather, the idea is to grow so *strongly in our affections for Christ* that it seems as though we are relaxing our heart's earthly grip on our friends and family. In the same way Christ demanded the hearts of his disciples to be so devoted to *Him* that, by comparison, it could be construed as hatred for one's own family. Certainly, genuine believers do not harbor hatred for their families. We love them. But by comparison, our affections for Christ must be *far and away greater* than those for any other being. Indeed, we are able to hold our loved ones dear while at the same time holding them loosely in their earthly state. As believers in Jesus Christ, we must ask ourselves where our heart's greatest affection lies. Is it with God in heaven looking forward to eternal life, or is it here on earth, where life is a vapor and all is passing away? Is our grip on our earthly relationships tight and strained, or is it relaxed and loose? May God continually transform our hearts and minds to love and enjoy our dearest friends and families within the scope of God's ultimate and eternal goal for His family—union with Him in heaven. Rejoice! For His kingdom awaits, as does the eternal presence of Christ our lovely Savior.

Spurgeon's gentle words to those grieving the loss of these miners reflect God's heart that is revealed in Scripture. He encourages them to reflect upon the eternity of heaven and recall the fleeting nature of this life that withers like grass in its due season. We can, today, ask God to increase our faith and hope in the coming day of the Lord.

We can, in this very moment, ask Him to strengthen our longing for Christ and grow our anticipation for the moment in which we will enter into an eternal, firsthand experience with our supreme, glorious, triune, loving Lord. Truly, there is only one way we can ever hold our precious

loved ones loosely here on earth. *Our affections for Christ and for His past and future grace must so far outweigh our love for anything or anyone else on earth, that in drawing nearer to Him we are able to let our loved ones pass from us—albeit with passionate grief, some level of emotional devastation, and deep mourning, but without being utterly destroyed or wrecked by ceaseless calamity. We know Christ is our King, our deepest love, and His eternal presence in heaven our ultimate destination.* [emphasis added]

Spurgeon continues,

Take care that thou puttest all thy dear ones into God's hand. Thou hast put thy soul there, put them there. Thou canst trust him for temporals for thyself, trust thy jewels with him. Feel that they are not thine own, but that they are God's loans to thee; loans which may be recalled at any moment... Your possessions are never so safe as when you are willing to resign them, and you are never so rich as when you put all you have into the hand of God. You shall find it greatly mitigate the sorrow of bereavements, if before bereavement you shall have learned to surrender every day all the things that are dearest to you into the keeping of your gracious God.

Indeed, we must draw nearer to Christ, and in doing so we must trust Him. Spurgeon exhorts his listeners to not delay in cultivating a heart of surrender to God. It is a complete surrender of everything and of everyone in our lives—even our dearest and most treasured jewels. We can begin doing this by offering daily praise to Him for blessing us with the cherished ones we call family and friends. We can offer a renewed confession of trust in Him. We can sing songs of praise to God for the time we have already been afforded with our loved ones, and we can begin living in relationship with one another as though we might die tomorrow—hearts ever focused on Christ and eternity with Him.

This is especially true for those of us with unbelieving family and friends. We must be filled with urgency to share the message of life that is found only in Christ. We must overcome the temporary discomfort of having an uncomfortable conversation, trading our silence for a refreshing discussion about the significance of a bloody cross and an empty tomb. We must live out the gospel of Jesus Christ. We must tell our loved ones who are devoid of genuine, life-changing faith in Jesus of the forgiveness of sins and the glorious, eternal life that are found in Christ alone. In agreement with this assertion, the always gospel-centered and urgent-minded Spurgeon delivered these famous lines to the ears of his listeners,

Oh, my brothers and sisters in Christ, if sinners will be damned, at least let them leap to hell over our bodies; and if they will perish, let them perish with our arms about their knees, imploring them to stay, and not madly to destroy themselves. If hell must be filled, at least let it be filled in the teeth of our exertions and let not one go there unwarned and unprayed for.

Truly, it is only by justification through the blood of Jesus Christ that we may, with Christ, taunt death, crying out,

O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:55–57, ESV).

May we rely ultimately and fully on our Lord, God, increasing in faith and love. May we confess our sins quickly and regularly, knowing that He is faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. May we remind ourselves that all we possess is on loan from the great triune God of the universe, and that He, in His sovereign will, may choose to call our dearest ones from us at anytime. Since that is the case, let us draw nearer to Christ and surrender our will daily, allowing Him to replace our worried and anxious thoughts with thoughts of His undying love and continual grace. Oh, how difficult it might seem to hold our dear ones loosely, but in holding Christ tightly, we are able. He drew us to Himself out of sin and death. How much more powerful and faithful is He, then, to also draw the troubled Christian nearer to Him in times of woe and anguish? May the Lord now increase our joy and our affections for what is most valuable and most precious in all this world—Himself. ☺

Notes:

¹ C. H. Spurgeon, “The Wailing at Risca,” in *Spurgeon’s Sermons*, Vol. 7 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2007), 328–343.

² Iain Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1966), 249.

Contents

Suffering and Glory	1
<i>Tom Ascol</i>	
The Joy of Paul's Ministry	4
<i>Rob Ventura and Jeremy Walker</i>	
God's Enabling Grace in the Path of Suffering	17
<i>Roger D. Duke</i>	
On Holding Loved Ones Loosely	27
<i>Kalb Stevenson</i>	
News	3