

Suffering and Glory

by David Jeremiah

Suffering is a normal part of the Christian life, and it can prove the reality of our faith, promote our dependence upon God, and purify our relationship with Him.

Duration: 42:45

Scripture: Isaiah 43:2, Romans 8:17

Topics: "Suffering"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker recounts the story of a man named Joseph who faced severe persecution for sharing his faith in Jesus. Despite being beaten and left to die multiple times, Joseph continued to proclaim the message of Christ. Through his suffering, Joseph's perseverance and unwavering faith in the face of adversity became a powerful witness to the village. The speaker emphasizes that suffering can provide opportunities for witnessing and references biblical passages from 2 Corinthians and Philipians to support this idea.

Transcript

We've been studying the book of Romans and we're in the 8th chapter and we're just going to kind of do a little survey of some stuff between the lines. For in the 8th chapter and verses 17 and 18 we are introduced to a subject that is going to occupy our attention in the next section but before we get into the next section we need to stop for a few moments and do a little homework because for most of us there has been very little teaching on this whole issue. I'm reading from Romans 8 verse 17 and I just want to read these verses and we'll look at them later but notice it says, and if children then heirs, heirs of God, join heirs with Christ.

We're all excited about the first part of that and then it says, if indeed we suffer with him that we may also be glorified together for I consider, said Paul, that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. J. I. Packer, the great theologian, defines suffering like this. He said, suffering is getting what you do not want while wanting what you do not get.

There are many terms used in the scripture to deal with this issue and it's far more extensive than we would ever believe because nobody ever sets out to study this. But when you become sensitized to it you start running into words everywhere in the New Testament. Words like affliction and anguish and distress and misery and grief and pain and tribulation and chastisement and metaphors in the New Testament like the refining fire of Isaiah in the Old Testament and overflowing waters and birth pangs.

All of these are used as pictures of suffering. I do not know what the health and wealth gospel people do with all these terms because in their terminology there's no place for any of this. But Paul says that before we can reign with Christ and before we're going to be glorified we're going to identify ourselves with him also in his suffering.

And when I talk about suffering I'm not talking about suffering we deserve. Peter says if you suffer for doing wrong you got what you deserved. Don't take any glory in that.

I'm not talking about people who get in trouble because they violate God's laws or they step outside of the moral boundaries which are so clearly said in the Bible. I'm talking about the kind of suffering that comes on people who are living for God who are walking in fellowship with him who more than anything else want to glorify God with their lives. How do you explain that? C.S. Lewis who has written one of the most definitive books on pain said in his book, now God who has made us knows what we are and that our happiness lies in him.

Yet we will not seek it in him as long as he leaves us any other resort where we can even plausibly look for it. While what we call our own life remains agreeable we will not surrender it to him. So what can God do in our own best interest but make our own life less agreeable to us and take away the plausible sources of false happiness? Interesting thought.

Did you hear what he said? Sometimes God helps us to understand at a very deep level that where we thought our happiness and joy was was only a mirage that our happiness really lies in him. So we're going to take a few moments and talk about this whole issue of suffering. Let's talk first about the relationship of suffering to the Christian life.

In Romans 8 that we read a moments ago we are reminded that suffering and glory go together. Suffering and glory belong together. They are married together.

They were married in the experience of Christ. They are married in the experience of his own people. It is only after we have suffered for a little while that we will enter into God's eternal glory in Christ.

So the sufferings and the glory are married and we can't do anything about that. We all want the glory. We don't want the suffering.

We want the joy. We just don't want the tribulation. We want Easter Sunday without Good Friday.

That's how we're put together. But these two things are welded. They cannot be broken apart.

Whatever else you're going to learn please learn this from the Word of God. You will get glory. You will get joy.

You will get fulfillment and somehow this is not a masochistic thing of some fundamentalist preacher. It's just the truth of the Word of God. The pathway to glory takes you through some suffering.

Now let's talk for a moment about the reality of all of this. The reality of suffering in the Christian life. There is suffering that is the direct result of our sinning and we're not talking about that.

There is suffering that we endure for Christ's sake. Suffering that comes from our Christian profession in a world that doesn't have anything to do with Christ. There is suffering that comes because we are in this imperfect world.

There is suffering that is ours because we are identified with Christ and the Bible never tries to dodge that issue. I was shocked at how many times this subject appears and the reason we don't know it is because we read past it. We don't want to stop and camp our tent there at all.

It's not a comfortable subject. We would rather just act as if it's not here. But watch these verses.

Notice what it says in 1st Peter 5.10. But may the God of all grace who called us to his eternal glory by Christ Jesus after you have suffered a while perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you. 2nd Timothy 3.12. Yea, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus, what's the rest of it, will suffer persecution. Philippians 3.10. Paul writes that I may know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings.

2nd Corinthians 1.5. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ. 1st Peter 4.12 and 13. Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you.

But rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when his glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. Philippians 1.29. For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ's sake, not only to believe in him, what's the rest of it, but also to suffer for his sake. In John 15.18-20, Jesus is speaking, listen to his words.

If the world hates you, you know that it hated me before it hated you. Now is that supposed to comfort us? It's the truth, isn't it? If you were of the world, the world would love its own, but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, a servant is not greater than his master.

If they persecuted me, they're going to persecute you too. John 15.18-20. You know, one of the things that happens is a lot of Christians come into faith in Christ and they get excited about the Lord, they have a conversion experience, and then you get thrown out into the world and nobody ever tells them this. And all of a sudden they show up in a hostile environment, they're excited about their faith, they're excited about Christ, and they find out that everybody's not excited about that.

And nobody has helped them to understand, and then they begin to wonder if something's wrong with them, or something's wrong with their faith, or why didn't God come through for me when I was under all this pressure? Listen, what the Word of God teaches is this, that suffering is the normal, natural, expected experience of believers, and we shouldn't be shocked when it happens to us in some fashion. John Piper said, so we must not water down the call to suffer, we must not domesticate all the New Testament teaching on affliction and persecution just because our lives are so smooth. It may be that we have not chosen to live in all of the radical ways that God wants us to live, it may be that our time of suffering is just around the corner, but it will not do to take our own comfortable lives and make them the measure of what we allow the Bible to mean.

In other words, we live, many of us, in very comfortable surroundings, in nice homes, and we drive decent cars, and wear halfway decent clothes, and we have most of our needs met, and so it's very difficult for us to come to grips with a subject like this. Suffering? What are you talking about, Pastor? David Barrett, who has done some research on us, estimates that in 1993, there were a hundred and fifty thousand Christians who died as martyrs, 93. He foresees that by the year 2000, there will be two hundred thousand martyrs in the world who died for Christ, most of them not in this country, but all over the world where people have

borne witness for Christ.

They have given their lives for their faith. Suffering is often the lot of God's people. It's just reality.

I love what Peter said, don't think it's strange when it happens to you. Don't say, why me, why now, whoops, what happened? Just understand, and this is not a defeatist attitude, it's a realistic approach to life, that there are bumps on the road. Can I get a witness? Amen.

You know that, the reality of suffering. Now, here's the real crux of the issue. What are the reasons for suffering? Why in the world does God allow this? Why does he let us suffer? I mean, if he's a good God, I remember when Rabbi Kushner wrote his book, *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*, remember that? It hit the bestseller, it was on New York Times bestsellers list for weeks and weeks, and I always have admired him as a communicator.

I don't, I don't, I'm not into his theology, because he's got, he's got a theology without a Messiah, which I mean, how do you have a theology without a Messiah? And he came to the conclusion that the reason bad things happen to good people is that God is an absentee God in their lives. That he creates the world, and he creates people, and then he just sort of walks away from it, and lets these things happen, because he said, if God is love, and God is in control, then those two things are in conflict, and the only way he could measure that out in his rational thinking was to, to assume that God created us in love, but withdrew to let us live our lives, and God is not involved in our pain. But God is involved in our pain.

Remember, Paul talked about the fellowship of Christ's sufferings. So why do Christians suffer? First of all, suffering proves the reality of our faith. Did you know that? 1st Peter 1.7 says it this way, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, might be found to praise, and honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Peter said, suffering proves the reality of your faith. Hebrews 12.5 says, have you forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as sons? My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by him, for, watch this, whom the Lord loves, he chastens, and scourges every son, every son whom he receives. If you're a son of God, one of the evidences of that, a daughter of God, if I can be politically correct, then you have to understand something, that part of your heritage in the family, you're going to experience some suffering.

Jonathan Cho, who is the president of Christ College in Taipei, director for the Chinese Church Research Center in Hong Kong, has studied suffering in the context of the suffering church in China, and he says, quote, one can almost say that suffering for Christ in our country is a mark of discipleship, end of quote. And Martin Lloyd-Jones said, if you are suffering as a Christian, and because you are a Christian, it is one of the surest proofs you can ever have of the fact that you are a child of God. If you're going through something right now, and you can't figure it out, and as far as you know, there's no sin in your life, and God has just put you in the crucible, and you're under pressure, and you're experiencing some things, you say, what's the good of this? Well, if the Bible says that all who live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer, then one of the reasons God allows this is that it might be a proof to us of our sonship.

That's the first reason. Secondly, suffering promotes our dependence upon God. Boy, do we know that.

We are so independent. Listen to this verse of Scripture from 2nd Corinthians 1, 8, and 9. Listen to these words. For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, or of our trouble, which came to us in Asia, that

we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life.

Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves. Now, watch the rest of this. That we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead.

How many of you know it's harder to trust in God that when everything's going great? When, you know, you just got to raise, you got everything in order, I mean, you got your whole life planned out, the retirement program is looking pretty good, the kids are all kind of, you know, they're okay, you know. Trust in God. But then you go to the doctor and you hear some bad news, or something happens in your home that you haven't expected, and all of a sudden, in the midst of suffering, what do you do? Wow, does it change.

You understand how desperately you need God, and you are forced into dependence upon Him. 2nd Corinthians 12, 9 says it this way, and he said to me, my grace is sufficient for you, for my strength, now watch this, is made perfect in weakness. Therefore, most gladly, I will rather boast in my infirmities, why? That the power of Christ may rest upon me.

God often takes his children and puts them through the ringer, so that they are divested of their own power, and then are filled with his power, and Paul said, if that's what I have to have, to have the power of God in my life, then so be it. I'd rather have the strength of Christ and the weakness of the flesh, than have it other way around. God knocked the props out from under Paul, so that he would have no choice but to fall on God, and get his hope only from him.

When we go through suffering, it is in order to promote our dependence upon God. Let me give you the third reason. Suffering purifies our relationship with God.

I remember these verses, underlining them in my Bible, during these last couple of years, from Psalm 119, verses 67 and 71. Watch this, this is the psalmist. He said, before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I keep your word.

It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn your statutes. In other words, what the psalmist is saying is, that God, you put me through some trouble, and the trouble made me come closer to you. You know what happens when you're a Christian, and you face pressure? The pressure does what? It drives you back to God.

The pressure is out here, and it drives you back to God. It draws you closer to him. It makes your relationship with God, to be a very special relationship.

I remember reading a story about a French painter, by the name of Pierre Renard. He was afflicted with arthritis. His hands became twisted, and deformed.

So much so, that a simple task, such as holding a brush, became excruciatingly painful. In time, he was confined to a wheelchair, but he would not give up painting. He refused to do that.

One day, his friend, Henri Matisse, visited him, and watched him as he painfully grasped a brush with only his fingertips. Every movement caused him pain, yet he doggedly kept at this painting. Matisse asked Renard, he said, what do you do this for? How can you paint at the expense of such torture? And he replied, the pain passes, but the beauty remains.

That's what happens to a Christian who goes through suffering. The pain passes, but the beauty of a greater, deeper, more loving relationship with God, drawing closer to him, that is a lasting value. One of our hymns puts it this way, when through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie, my grace all-sufficient will be thy supply, the flame shall not hurt thee, I only design thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.

What is the hymn writer saying? You're gonna go through this, it's gonna be painful, but the thing that'll happen is, God will use it to burn away the impurities of your life, and drive you back to him. James 1:3 says, consider it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. I remember clipping this out of a discipleship magazine, which I get and have taken for a number of years, and it was kind of an analysis of why this is such a hard subject for us here in America.

It goes like this, patience is the supreme taunt to the West. It taunts us because we have grown up with the habit of immediacy. We have watched the deepest of human conflicts resolved in 30 minutes on a television screen, and we have come to expect the modern medicine a quick cure for every attack of disease.

To the West, endurance is synonymous with frustration. Small endurances bring on a stamping of the foot and a rearing of impatience. We honk the horn if the car ahead of us doesn't pull away from the light when it turns green.

We mutter when waitresses take too long. Is it any wonder that we are undone and shattered when we are held in the vice of a prolonged difficult experience? We flail about helplessly. Thoughts of coping are overwhelming and bewildering.

We don't want stamina, we want out. Isn't that true of us? So one of the other reasons for suffering is that when we suffer it produces endurance in us. It makes us hang in there when we don't want to.

God takes our impatience in his hands and he helps us to learn. Someone said God often moves the tape ten feet further just when we think we're finishing the last lap. Has he ever done that to you? And something happens in us when we've spent all that we have and we think we're at the end of our resources and then we look up and there's still another thirty yards to go.

How are we going to do that? And we discover that when we are at the end of ourselves and we have no resources, when we have been put through this, God gives us the endurance to get up the next day and to put our feet on the floor and to start walking ahead and going forward and we discover in the process of this that he gives us the strength for the day. How many of you know that? Isn't that true? And until you experience this, you can't know that. You are incomplete.

Let me just tell you something, if you've had any suffering, you know, you're just not complete. God is, he's left something out of your training. He'll get to it sooner or later.

But the completeness of walking through the fire with God and knowing that he is sufficient for every emotion and every experience and every deficiency you feel, that is the benefit of suffering. It causes you to have endurance in your life. And the next time he comes around, you know, hey, I've been down that road and it doesn't seem like there's any answer right now and it's really tough but I want to tell you something, I remember when I was on this road before, God was enough.

He was enough. So I'm going to keep going. I'll just touch on this and you can put it in your notes.

Suffering prunes us for greater effectiveness. Did you know that? The Bible says in John 15, every branch that does not bear fruit, he takes away. And every branch that bears fruit, he prunes it, that it might bear more fruit.

One of the reasons God brings suffering into our life is to take away the things that are drawing off the energy of the Spirit that should be directed toward more productive things. And I'll just say this, sometimes when you go through a time of suffering or discipline in your life from God, he makes you stop and look at all the things you're doing and ask yourself, am I doing the things God wants me to do or am I doing the things that I want to do? And sometimes he'll start lopping things off the edge. Because you see, one of the reasons why they prune a vineyard is because little shoots begin to grow on the vine that suck up the sap that causes fruit to happen.

And so they go through the vineyard and they take their shears and they clip off these little shoots that grow out of the vine that don't have any fruit on them, because what happens is they suck away the energy that's in the vine that should be directed to the fruitfulness of the vine. Does God ever do that in your life? Comes along with pressure, and in the midst of that pressure you say, wait a minute, I need to get that out of my life. That's just eating up the energy that God wants to use for this.

I don't think we'll ever, ever get finished with that process. You know, you just think you've got it figured out and it happens again, and you get rid of one thing and five more things grow back. Have you noticed that? The pruning process for more effectiveness.

And I want to spend a little time on this one, that suffering provokes courage in other believers. Because this is a really exciting evidence of how God uses this in our lives. Philippians 1.14 says it this way, and that most of the brethren trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment have far more courage to speak the Word of God without fear.

Paul said that when he was in prison, one of the evident things that happened while he was in prison was that the people who knew he was in prison took courage from his pain. And they were more bold to preach the gospel. They saw the suffering of Paul, and because of that, they were emboldened to preach with greater power.

In our own time, it is hard to overstate the impact that the martyrdom of Jim Elliot and Nate Saint and Ed McCulley and Pete Fleming and Robert Udarian has had on generations of students. The word that appeared again and again in the testimonies of those who heard the story of the Akha Indians and the slaying of those men, the word that was heard was the word dedication. But one of the things that is often untold when the story of the Akha Indians is told is that the real courage was probably in the women, in the wives of these men.

Barbara Udarian, the wife of Raj, wrote in her diary that night in January of 1956 these words, and I have these words from her diary. She said, tonight the captain told us of finding four bodies in the river. One had a t-shirt and blue jeans.

Raj was the only one who wore them. God gave me this verse two days ago, Psalm 84 14, for this God is our God forever and ever. He will be our guide even unto death.

As I came face to face with the news of Raj's death, my heart was filled with praise. He was worthy of his home going. Help me, Lord, to be both mommy and daddy.

And out of that testimony, hundreds and hundreds of recruits went to the mission field. More recently, the execution of Wycliffe missionary Chet Bitterman by the Colombian guerrilla group, M-19, in March of 81 unleashed an incredible zeal for the cause of Christ. Chet Bitterman had been in captivity for seven weeks while his wife Brenda and their little daughters Anna and Esther waited in Bogota, and the demand of the M-19 was that Wycliffe get out of Colombia.

They shot him just before dawn, a single bullet to the chest, and the police found his body in the bus where he died in a parking lot in the south of town. He was clean and shaven, his face relaxed. A guerrilla banner wrapped his remains.

There were no signs of torture. In the year following Chet Bitterman's death, applications for overseas service with Wycliffe Bible translators doubled, and the trend has continued into this very day, and it all goes back to the moment of his suffering for Christ. It is not the kind of missionary mobilization that any of us would choose, but it is often God's way, and John says, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

How often that has been true in the history of Christianity. When we suffer, God uses our suffering to bring courage and strength to others, and then suffering provides opportunities for witness. 2 Corinthians 4.10 says, always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus may be manifest in our body, for we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus may be manifest in our own mortal flesh.

And Paul, again writing in Philippians, said, but I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happen to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel, so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard and to all the rest that my chains are in Christ. What is Paul saying? Here I'm in prison. You guys are all praying for me, and you're worried about me? But I want to tell you that while I'm in prison, what you need to know is, God has used my suffering as a means of testimony, and you know what happened to him, don't you? Every day, over four-hour periods, they chained two guards to him.

Just what Paul wanted. He had a captive audience for the gospel. These guys would wake up every day, they wanted to get away from him, but they couldn't.

They were handcuffed to the guy, and he witnessed to them, and when you get to the end of the book of Philippians, there's this great passage where he lists all the people who were saved out of Caesar's household. How did they get saved? God put Paul in prison, and in his prison experience, gave him this opportunity to testify to the grace of God. And some of you here today, and I've talked to you because over the years, and I've been thinking about some of this this week, I would never know very much about you, except what I have learned about you because of the pain God has allowed you to experience, and in the midst of that pain, you have been a testimony to so many people.

Some of you will never know the sight of eternity. The witness. One of the most powerful illustrations of the purpose of suffering and witness is presented in a story that Michael Card tells about a man named Joseph, who had come to Christ out of his Muslim religion.

Michael Card, as some of you know, is a wonderful man of God, a singer, a writer. He tells this story. He said, one day Joseph, who was walking along one of those hot, dirty African roads, met someone who shared the gospel of Jesus Christ with him.

Then in there, he accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior, and the power of the Holy Spirit began transforming his life. He was filled with such excitement and joy that the first thing he wanted to do was go back and return to his own village and share the same good news with the members of his local tribe. Joseph began going from door to door, telling everyone he met about the cross of Jesus and the salvation that it offered, expecting their faces to light up just as his had.

To his amazement, the villages not only didn't care, they became violent. The men of the village seized him and held him to the ground while the women beat him with strands of barbed wire. He was dragged from the village and left to die alone in the bush.

Joseph somehow managed to crawl to a water hole, and thereafter, days of passing in and out of consciousness, found the strength to get up. He wandered about. He couldn't understand the hostile reception he had received from the people he had known all of his life, and finally he decided that he must have left something out or not told the story correctly.

So after rehearsing the message, he decided to go back and share his faith again. He limped into the circle of huts and began to proclaim Jesus. He died for you so that you might find forgiveness and come to know the living God.

And again, he was grabbed by the men of the village and held while the women beat him, reopening the wounds that had just begun to heal. Once more, they dragged him unconscious from the village and left him to die. To have survived the first beating was truly remarkable.

To live through the second was a miracle. Again, days later, Joseph awoke in the wilderness, bruised, scarred, and determined in his heart to go back. He returned to the small village, and this time they attacked him before he had a chance to open his mouth.

As they flogged him for the third and probably the last time, he again spoke to them of Jesus Christ the Lord. And before he passed out, the last thing he saw was that the women who were beating him had begun to weep. This time he awoke in his own bed.

The ones who had so severely beaten him were now trying to save his life and nurse him back to health. And the entire village came to know Jesus Christ. What a story.

And I read that and I wondered, you know, we think we're going through such hard times. I wonder how much pain we are willing to bear so that someone might know Christ. I'm going to tell you something.

Sometimes God allows suffering in our lives that it might be a means of witnessing to others. In the midst of our pain, we can tell others what they might not ever listen to in our wholeness. And then this is sort of where we began, and this is the last reason.

Suffering prepares us to reign with Christ. Romans 8, 17 is the verse we started with, that if heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, indeed we suffer with him that we might be glorified with him. And 2 Thessalonians 1, 4 and 5 says this, therefore we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure.

This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God for which indeed you are suffering. You know, I wish I could tell you that I understand all of this. I've been meditating on this all week.

There seems to be in the Bible, and maybe we can talk about this a little bit more next time, there seems to be in the Bible a relationship, now listen to me, between the amount of suffering we do in this life and the amount of reigning we do in the kingdom. It seems as if suffering is a very special kind of preparation for reigning with Christ. I don't understand that completely, and yet everywhere I turn, 2 Timothy 2, 12 says, if we endure, we shall also reign with him.

If we deny him, he also will deny us. John Piper writes that following Jesus means that wherever obedience requires it, we will accept betrayal and rejection and beating and mockery and crucifixion and death. Jesus gives us the assurance that if we will follow him to Golgotha during all the good Fridays of this life, we will also rise with him on every Easter day of the resurrection.

Amen. There was an aging Christian who once objected to John Patton, the great missionary's plan to go as a missionary to the South Sea Islands, and he said, if you go there, Patton, you're going to be eaten by cannibals. Patton responded, Mr. Dixon, you are advanced in years now, and your own prospect is soon to be laid in the grave there to be eaten by worms.

He said, I confess to you that if I can but live and die serving and honoring the Lord Jesus, it will make no difference to me whether I'm eaten by cannibals or eaten by worms. And in the great day of my resurrection body, I will arise just as fair as you in the likeness of our risen Redeemer. Amen.

Well, I've just given you a little survey of some of the reasons why God allows suffering. And you know, one of the things that happens to me when I go through this is, it helps me a little bit as God's child, when tough things come, to realize that God has a purpose. But I want to end this by just telling you that there's a response to suffering that we ought to just think about, and I can by no means even touch the hem of the garment of this truth.

But the response to suffering in the Christian life is, first of all, preparation. Paul tried to prepare his converts for suffering. Did you know that? I don't know if you ever saw that in the Bible.

After Paul established the churches, he'd go back and he'd train them. And you know, he didn't have classes on how to manage your marriage. He taught them how to suffer.

For instance, in 1st Thessalonians 3, 2, and 4, he says, and we sent Timothy to establish and encourage you concerning your faith that no one should be shaken by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are appointed to this. For in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it has happened.

Paul said, I want you to understand this is part of this business. You need to be prepared for it. When he returned from his first missionary journey, he stopped at the young churches that he had established and he encouraged them with the same truth.

Listen to this passage. And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, we must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God. I am astounded at the honesty with which the apostolic teaching took place and the way we deceive ourselves into thinking that being a Christian is a walk in the park.

It never has been that way since the beginning. I had the privilege several years back to meet Richard Wurmbrand, who endured 14 years of imprisonment and torture in his homeland of Romania between

1948 and 1964. He had led a secret underground ministry when the communists seized Romania and tried to control the church for their purposes.

And Wurmbrand, like the Apostle Peter, stresses the tremendous need to get spiritually ready to suffer. And I want you to hear what he said. What shall we do about these tortures? Will we be able to bear them? If I do not bear them, I put in prison another 50 or 60 men whom I know, because that is what the communists wish from me, to betray those around me.

And here comes the great need for the role of preparation, he wrote. It will be too difficult to prepare yourself for it when the communists have put you in prison. I remember, he said, my last confirmation class before I left Romania.

I took a group of 10 to 15 boys and girls on a Sunday morning, not to church but to the zoo. Before the cage of lions, I told them, your forefathers in faith were thrown before such wild beasts for their faith. Know that you also will have to suffer.

You will not be thrown before lions, but you will have to do with men who would be much worse than lions. Decide here and now if you wish to pledge allegiance to Christ. They had tears in their eyes and they all said yes.

I wonder what would happen if we recruited our recruits like that. Take them to the zoo before the lion cage and say, here's what your forefathers put up with to be a Christian. Are you willing to sign on? I think our converts might go down a little bit, don't you? We need to be prepared.

And I'm not talking about, again, having a morbid attitude about life. I'm just saying, when you know that there's going to be some hard times because of who you are in Christ, you're not going to be surprised when they come. You're going to walk through them with courage and strength.

And then, I just want to just add this little thought, and that is, after preparation, I want to put down the word memorization. Because, you know, when you're going through tough times, you don't have time to go back and memorize. And there's some wonderful truths in the Word of God that help you when you go through trouble.

Did you know that? It'd be such a wonderful thing if you knew some of these verses. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. And through the rivers, they will not overflow you.

When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, nor will the flame burn you. Isaiah 43. Did you ever stop and think about memorizing some passages of Scripture to arm yourself, so that when trouble comes, you'll know how to deal with it? Get it in your vocabulary, so that immediately it comes to mind, and you know how to deal with it scripturally.

And then the last word is the word dedication. Paul was dedicated in such a way that even if suffering was to be a part of his experience, he was willing to face it. I wonder if we're dedicated to God in such a way that we are willing to face the challenges that come with being a Christian.

We're going to see that it's harder and harder to be a Christian in this culture. In fact, let me say this. It is acceptable to be almost anything in the American culture today than to be a Christian.

You can get by with anything. You can believe anything. You can say anything.

You can do anything. But if you say you're a Christian in public, you can count on it. They're going to pull the mic away from you.

You go into the schools. You want to talk about Christ? You can talk about Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, any kind of craziness you want to, but you start talking about Christ, and you will be singled out. And I don't think that's going to get better.

And I'm not trying to say let's all get scared that the world's caving in on us. I'm just saying, wouldn't it be good for us to be kind of prepared, so that when the challenge comes, we're not weak. I want to tell you something.

Nothing's going to come upon us that we can't handle in power of God. Nothing. God and us are a majority.

You know that, don't you? And for those of us who are pastors, I want to end with this word from an old friend of mine by the name of Charles Haddon Spurgeon. I feel as if I've known him for years, even though I wasn't born before he died. But I've read so many of his writings and so have admired his testimony for Christ.

He has written a book for preachers, and in that book he has a word about what we've talked about. And I want to finish with this. He said, don't be surprised when friends fail you.

It is a failing world. Never count on the immutability of man. Inconsistency you can reckon upon without fear of disappointment.

The disciples of Jesus forsook him. Don't be amazed if your adherents wander away to other teachers. They were not all yours when you had them.

All is not gone when they've left. Serve God with all your might while the candle is burning, and then when it goes out for a season you'll have less to regret. Be content to be nothing, for that is what you are.

When your own emptiness is painfully forced upon your consciousness, chide yourself that you ever dreamed of being full except in the Lord. Set small store by present rewards. Be grateful for earnest along the way, but look for your reward in the hereafter.

Continue with double earnestness to serve your Lord when no visible result is before you. Any simpleton can follow the narrow path in the light. Faith's rare wisdom enables us to march on in the dark with infallible accuracy, since she places her hand in that of her great guide.

Between here and heaven there may be rougher weather yet, but all is provided for by your covenant God. In nothing be turned aside from the path which the divine call has urged you to pursue. Come fair or come foul, the pulpit is your watchtower, and the ministry is your warfare.

Be it ours when we cannot see the face of our God to trust under the shadow of his wings. I'm going to put that under the glass on my desk to remind me that it's easy to follow God in the light, easy to be excited when everything's going well, but the true soldier is the soldier who marches on in the night when he doesn't really know on the landscape where he is except he's following his leader. And that's all God has called us to do.

He's asked us to follow Christ, the captain of our salvation, who went before us and endured Gethsemane and endured the cross for the joy that was set before him. And that is our task as well.

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