

Suffering With Christ

by Lewis Sperry Chafer

The sermon emphasizes the significance of suffering with Christ and the role of intercessory prayer in evangelism.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:4

Topics: "Intercessory Prayer", "Spiritual Suffering"

Description

Lewis Sperry Chafer emphasizes the importance of intercessory prayer as the first and most crucial service in reaching the lost. He highlights the need to wait on God for His leading before approaching individuals about their need for Christ, cautioning against forcing decisions without the Spirit's guidance. Chafer discusses the suffering that comes with compassion for the unsaved, pointing out that true evangelism involves sympathetic suffering and a deep burden for souls. He underscores the necessity of being led by the Spirit in all forms of service, including personal work and ministry, and the significance of suffering with Christ in identifying with His mission and glory.

Transcript

It should not be concluded from what has gone before that there is no other God-appointed human service in behalf of the lost than the prayer of intercession. It is true, however, that intercessory prayer is the first and most important service. As has been stated, the divine order is to talk to God about men, until the door is definitely open to talk to men about God. Any service which He may appoint after believing prayer has been offered will be wonderfully blessed by Him. But to intrude upon strangers, unless positively led to do so, or to implore unwilling and unprepared men, is to display a zeal without knowledge, and is fraught with peril to immortal souls. Such boldness is often urged and commended as being a high form of Christian service; yet no Spirit-filled person can rush ahead of the movements of God without a deep sense of protest from the Spirit Who indwells him. It is not altogether due to personal diffidence that true believers often find it difficult to speak to the unsaved about their need of Christ. There may be a restraint upon such service; for if the unsaved are not prepared by the Spirit, any attempt to force a decision may be a violation of the plan of God.

If space could be given here to incidents illustrating the necessity of waiting on God and for God as the first effort to be made for the salvation of any person, it would be apparent that the preparation of one soul may require many years, or this preparation may be accomplished in another in as many hours; but seldom is it advantageous to press the decision until some evidence is given that the Spirit is leading

toward such an appeal. Such quiet waiting will always be rewarded; for, as in the days as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, there will usually be some clear indication from the illuminated person that the heart is prepared, although it be but a look or action, which will be a sufficient assurance that the way is open for any necessary word to be spoken which will direct that heart to its acceptance of Christ. Coaxing and pleading will be found to be unnecessary, for the soul will be thirsting for the Water of Life. When led of the Spirit, the child of God must be as ready to wait as to go, as prepared to be silent as to speak.

The precious service of leading the enlightened person to a decision is often appointed to the one who has first suffered for that person in intercession. This is the real place of so-called "personal work," and too much cannot be said as to the value of the careful preparation and instruction of every believer for this particular service; for there is need of great clearness and skill in explaining the exact terms of the Gospel to the one upon whom the Spirit is moving in conviction and illumination. The whole plan of salvation should be clearly understood, and those texts and passages kept in mind which are adapted to meet the mental confusion that Satan produces in those with whom the Spirit is dealing. There is need also of a clear understanding of the great distinctions between the saved and the unsaved, and God's entire plan of dealing with each. A child of God who has long been "walking in darkness" will often appear as an unregenerate soul; yet the Spirit will not deal with him as such, and his way back into fellowship with God must be by confession alone, and not by an unscriptural second conversion. Above all, the personal worker must be wholly dependent upon the leading of the Spirit. He should be as prepared to do the unusual thing as the usual. If really prepared for service, his ear will be open to God concerning every person he may chance to meet, but he will not assume to force a decision without divine direction. With the great commission to preach the gospel to every creature, it may usually be assumed that God would have us speak to men, with all earnestness, unless otherwise led by the Spirit. There is an important distinction to be considered between presenting the Gospel of saving grace to a company of men, and demanding an immediate decision from an individual. A personal decision should be pressed only when so led by the Spirit.

All true service for God is the ministry of the Spirit through the believer (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:4-31), and it is therefore vain to form hard and fast rules by which we intend to do this service. God will direct a yielded life in service which He has appointed in His sovereign power and grace. Compassion for lost souls will be created in the heart by the Spirit, and this will find expression and relief in the Spirit-inspired prayer of intercession. The Spirit will then answer this prayer by going forth through some ministry of the Word, with convicting and converting power to the glory of Christ.

The burden of heart that can find no peace because of the lost condition of some individual is the highest form of human suffering, and is several times referred to in the Scriptures. There this burden for the lost is seen, not only to form a part of human suffering, but to be a normal experience in the life of every saved person. That it is not a common experience among Christians today can be explained only by the fact that there are abnormal conditions in many Christian lives.

The reality of human suffering and its place in a Christian's life is so vital a part of true evangelism, and occupies so conspicuous a place in the New Testament, that it should be considered sufficiently at length to distinguish that particular part of suffering which has to do with the salvation of the lost from its other aspects.

The believer may suffer for Christ. This form of suffering may include the involuntary sacrifice of the loss of friends, property, reputation, or health, and the voluntary sacrifice or separation from loved ones, gifts,

humiliation and faithful service, even unto death. It is stated in Phil. 1:29 that such suffering is a gift to the believer: "Unto you it is given in behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake." Unto you it is given to be parted from loved ones in the world-wide ministry of the Gospel, to become poor that others may become rich, to suffer separation or privation as a sacrifice for Him.

This form of suffering was experienced by the Lord of Glory, and to those who are in the midst of these afflictions it is said: "The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us"; and "Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."

The suffering of a Christian according to the Scriptures is primarily suffering with Christ. This is attested by various passages (1 Pet. 4:13; Rom. 8:17; Col. 1:24; Phil. 2:5-9; and 2 Tim. 2:12). The important word used in connection with the believer's relation to Christian suffering is "with," and that word emphasizes the necessary distinction that much of the suffering in the world is alien to fellowship with Christ. On the other hand, this word suggests a vital union and divine co-partnership between the suffering believer and his suffering Lord.

In suffering with Christ the Christian may either suffer from man the reproaches of Christ, or he may come to experience with Christ a divinely wrought burden and sorrow for the lost. Beyond this it is impossible for any believer to go in the mystery of the sufferings of Christ; for what He suffered from God in becoming Himself an offering for sin could not be shared by any other, though one might greatly desire a similar ministry. (See Rom. 9:1-3.)

Suffering with Christ is a natural phase of a Christian's life and experience. He is sojourning in an enemy's land, is called to be a witness against its sin, and is summoned to labor that souls may be saved from its evil and darkness. "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own; but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you" (John 15:18, 19). To those who did not believe on Him He said: "The world cannot hate you; but me it hateth, because I testify of it, that the works thereof are evil" (John 7:7). "It is enough for the disciple that he be as his master, and the servant as his lord. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more shall they call them of his household?" (Matt. 10:25). "As thou has sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world" (John 17:18). "Beloved, 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 Pet. 4:12, 13).

So also, as is seen by these passages, suffering with Christ here is the only possible path into the reward of being glorified together with Him over there. This is not salvation, for salvation cannot be gained by any degree of human suffering. It is rather that for which the glorious crown and reward is to be given to the faithful in their co-partnership with Christ. This truth is emphasized in the following passage: "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:5-11).

Here it is inferred that the believer is to allow the mind of Christ to be reproduced in him by the power of God (Phil. 2:13), and these seven successive steps in the path of Christ, from His native place in the glory to the felon's death on the cross, are reviewed in this Scripture in order that such steps may be admitted in the Christian's life, who is to be "as his Lord" even in this world. It is also inferred in this passage that, through this relation to Jesus in suffering, there is to be an identity with Him in His glory. "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together. For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:16-18). "It is a faithful saying: For if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him: if we suffer, we shall also reign with him: if we deny him he also will deny us" (2 Tim. 2:11, 12).

Suffering was the ministry to which Paul was appointed by the Lord through the disciple Ananias when the Lord commanded Ananias: "Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel: for I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake" (Acts 9:15, 16).

Thus it may be concluded that, while all the mystery of suffering is not explained, and probably cannot be, it is an essential part of the Christian's life and union with Christ in this world, and of identification with Him in His glory.

Of that suffering which is from man and because of the believer's relation and loyalty to Christ it is said: "Beloved, 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. If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evil doer, or as a busybody in other men's matters. Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf." (1 Pet. 4:12-16).

It is, however, sympathetic suffering that enters most directly into the movements of the power of God in evangelism. As a mother's face may reflect more pain than the face of her suffering child, so there is an unlimited realm of possible suffering in sympathy and burden for another. This highest and deepest suffering is born of two parents, which are love and appreciation. The brute may love its offspring, but cannot appreciate its sufferings; while a savage may appreciate pain, but cares little for the suffering one. To the one who both knows and feels there is revealed a degree of the mystery of suffering in sympathy.

When the sufferings of Christ are contemplated in the light of this simple fact, it will be seen that back of the death of Christ is, on the part of God, first of all the infinite wisdom, vision and power to appreciate. He comprehended man's sin, his eternal ruin, and necessary banishment from His presence. And second, He loved the world of men enough to act mightily in their behalf. That He loved them is the reason of His effort for them. That He appreciated their terrible need was the warrant for the particular thing He did. The measure of His appreciation and love is unbounded; for "He bore our sins in his own body on the tree," which reveals the reality of our sins as viewed by an infinite God. He became the propitiation for the sins of the whole world.

It was not the love of God alone that was revealed in the death of Christ, His eternal wisdom and Godhead are seen as well by the particular thing which He did for man's redemption. In that death He also disclosed

His estimate of man's need. So the cross is, in the mind and heart of the Infinite, both a warning of doom and a wooing of love; and it is no credit to finite man that he denies the voice of the Infinite, rejects His verdict of human hopelessness, and misinterprets the value and vision of the death of Christ.

The dominant motive that prompted the sufferings of Christ was revealed in one of His prayers at the cross. Had His suffering been physical alone, His prayer might have been, Father, they are causing Me physical pain; or had His sufferings been His personal sacrifice alone, He might have prayed, Father, they are taking My life from Me: in reality He prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And while the sufferings of His body and the sacrifice of His life constituted an offering for sin, "once for all," these were prompted by the divine vision of human need and His yearning compassion for lost and ruined men; for He prayed not for Himself but for them. In that mysterious suffering for the sin of the world no human can suffer with Christ. That suffering was final and complete. It can only be believed in and appropriated by the one who has come to realize his own share in it.

When a soul has received the redemption which is in Christ and is saved, that one is then privileged to suffer with Christ in a compassion for the lost; being prompted, in some measure, by the same divine vision and love, through the presence and power of the indwelling Spirit.

This is illustrated by the testimony of the Apostle Paul in Rom. 9:1-3: "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."

Much is said in the preceding context of the power and blessing of the Spirit indwelling the Christian. In this passage, however, He is seen lifting the Apostle Paul to a similar view-point as that which Christ occupied, when He was willing to be accursed that lost men might be saved, and which He experienced when He cried, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" From this point of divine vision Paul longs, too, with an unutterable longing to make some sufficient sacrifice, even an impossible and terrible separation from Christ his Lord, if only his brethren, his kinsmen after the flesh, might be saved. This attitude of agonizing suffering for the salvation of his brethren was not an element of the human nature of Saul, who found his delight in the condemnation and execution of his brethren when they were found to be followers of Jesus; nor is this divine touch found in any unregenerate life. It is the love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which is given unto us, or in reality, the very love of God reaching out for the lost through the believer. (See also John 15:12, 13; Gal. 5:22.) This experience of Paul's is possible to others. By the Indwelling One, the believer may come both to appreciate the lost estate of men and to experience a divine compassion for them.

Suffering with Christ, then, in its deepest meaning, is to come to experience by the Spirit an unutterable agony for men out of Christ, and from that vision and love to be willing to offer personal sacrifice or endure physical pain, if need be, that they may be saved. This is as near to "a cross" as the Christian can come in experience; for he can make no atonement, nor is human atonement needed. As his eyes are opened and his heart is made sensitive to the indescribable need of any soul out of Christ, he has, to that extent, experienced the divine compassion "shed abroad in his heart." Such suffering with, Christ is the heritage of every regenerate soul.

One has but to recall the spiritual agony of soul, like the physical pain of a woman in travail, that has borne down upon believers in connection with the birth of souls in the great ingatherings of history to understand

the reality of divinely-wrought suffering with Christ, which is granted to the believer, and is the sure warrant of identification with Him in His glory. So, whenever a believer is prepared to receive this great gift of suffering with Christ, it will be granted unto him to such a degree, and at such times as he is able to bear it. All pity for those Christians who, through want of adjustment to the mind and purpose of God, are never so privileged!

When the heavenly riches and rewards, with the eternal blessedness of one soul that is saved are considered, how great is the price we pay for our indifference toward the unsaved about us on every hand! Could we but get one glimpse of this life with its priceless opportunities, as it will be seen in retrospect from the glory, we would suffer nothing to divert us from that unbroken walk with God in which He would impart all His own passion and love to our hearts and cause us to be instant in season and out of season in the winning of souls.

There is a great lost world of individuals surrounding every believer, and if his heart is attuned to the Spirit Who indwells him, he cannot but suffer at times with Christ in an agony of soul that they may be saved. That soul-anguish in a believer may find its expression only in "groanings which cannot be uttered." In this extremity, he will be driven into the holiest place, and he will find no relief except in the priestly prayer of intercession.

Through such intercession the Spirit is covenanted to go forward to deal with unregenerate men, and by His mighty Sword to strike the blindness from their eyes, and to bring them face to face with the salvation that is in Jesus Christ.

It will be observed that this divine burden for the lost is a very uncommon experience among believers today; and the solution of this problem is found in the last step that marks the movements of the "power of God unto salvation." The difficulty lies in the defilement of the believers who are priests before God and who do not and cannot, because of their own unfitness, experience the love of God for others, or prevail with God in the holy place.

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