

CHAPTER 15

THE CROSS AND OUR SUFFERING

THE CROSS AS A PARADIGM FOR HOW WE DEAL WITH SUFFERING

**God magnifies Himself, not by eradicating suffering from the life of His people, but by conforming His people to the patient enduring of Christ in His sufferings.<sup>1</sup>**

Of the various kinds of suffering mentioned in the New Testament, the suffering of Christ and the persecution of Christians are dealt with most. It is extremely difficult for us to relate to the suffering of Christians in the New Testament because we in modern North America know almost nothing first hand of the kinds of persecution the early Christians suffered: various forms of reproach, social ostracism and humiliation, public abuse, torture and execution, imprisonment and the seizure of possessions.<sup>2</sup> To appreciate the teachings in the New Testament on Jesus' sufferings being paradigmatic for us, we must attempt to picture what it would be like to suffer as Christians of the first century or persecuted Christians of today in other countries. Then we can apply the paradigm of the Cross to the emotional suffering that we go through in our daily lives in response to being treated badly; moreover, we can apply it to all the hurts we have suffered for our whole lives, even before we were born.

Other kinds of suffering that we go through, such as sickness, hunger, storms, and financial problems are sometimes reaping what we sow, individually or by a society as a whole: “. . . A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction . . .” (Gal. 6:7) This reaping is often part of the suffering of discipline that God uses to show us where we have sown the wrong kinds of seeds and to lead us to repentance. There is also willing suffering for others, which I hope to deal with in another chapter on “burden bearing”. At present, I will only deal with our suffering that we feel is unjust and how the paradigm of the Cross relates to such suffering.

You will recall the “character assassination” that I mentioned in Chapter 2, which preceded my initial revelation of the Cross as a paradigm from Philippians 3:10 and Isaiah 53. In that chapter, I stressed how I saw that my response to the attacks on my character had fallen far short of the standard of Jesus' love; i.e., the paradigm of the Cross. In this chapter, I want to look more at what scriptures show us about how being conformed to Jesus' suffering affects our responses in such situations. In retrospect, I see the suffering that I endured because of my friends' scandalous “backbiting” was an essential part of God's opening my eyes to wonderful truths of the Cross as our paradigm.

Not long after that revelation, I received a letter from another person, who wrote the following:

. . . you made an alliance with a demon, which demon gives you power over people. This demon attacks and hurts your children & grandchildren physically, emotionally, spiritually, financially + + + . . . your presence with, your thoughts towards them are curses.

After the initial shock from reading this accusation, I worked through different emotions that arose. Because of the revelation of the Cross as my paradigm, I desired the same attitude as Jesus towards His accusers. I asked the Holy Spirit to expose everything in me that would want to retaliate, and I asked Him to change me that I would feel and express only God's forgiveness and blessing towards my accuser and towards all others who would criticize or reject me. I know that there has been some progress in my knowing “the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death” (Phil. 3:10);

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<sup>1</sup>Jeong Woo "James" Lee "Carrying about in the Body the Dying of Jesus" [http://www.newlife-lajolla.org/members\\_only/sermons/dying\\_of\\_jesus.htm](http://www.newlife-lajolla.org/members_only/sermons/dying_of_jesus.htm)

<sup>2</sup>L. W. Hurtado, “Jesus' Death as Paradigmatic in the New Testament” An invited paper for the annual meeting of the Society for Systematic Theology, Newcastle, 7-10 April 2003. <http://www.ex.ac.uk/~mahigton/Hurtado.rtf>

nevertheless, I know that this process of being conformed to His death needs to continue until I respond to all accusations or criticisms with only the same loving forgiving nature that Jesus expressed during His suffering and death.

In Hebrews 12, we have Jesus' endurance through sufferings held up as a focus for our worship and our praise and as a paradigm for us to adopt:

. . . **Let us fix our eyes on Jesus**, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. **Consider him** who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Heb. 12:1b-3)

In the next chapter of Hebrews we have another reference to Jesus' sufferings as redemptive and also paradigmatic, in which the author of Hebrews urges us to align ourselves with Jesus' sufferings by a readiness to bear social ostracism and other shameful consequences of our faith. Such a readiness would be included in the condition given by Jesus to anyone who wants to be His disciple—that he must “take up his cross”.

. . . Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. (Heb. 13:12, 13a)

In Peter's first epistle, several times he points to Jesus' sufferings/death as paradigmatic and inspirational for those being persecuted:

. . . but **if you suffer for doing good and you endure it**, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, **leaving you an example**, that you should **follow in his steps**. “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. (1 Pet. 2:20-23)

Here Peter urges His readers to recognize that they are “called” to “endure” unjust suffering “because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example<sup>3</sup>, so that you should follow in his steps”. Note that “the context (especially vv. 18-20) makes it clear that what is called for is not a simple replication of Jesus' sufferings, but rather a readiness to endure whatever particular sufferings may come one's way, including especially unjust sufferings, taking Jesus' behaviour as exemplary.”<sup>4</sup> How ready are we to endure such suffering for Christ as an expression of our love to Him? How much do we want to be conformed to the way the Jesus behaved during His suffering?—enough to take full responsibility for all our responses and repent of all ways not according to the paradigm of the Cross?

The following is a challenging exhortation from Andrew Murray for us to focus on the example of Christ in His suffering:

There is almost nothing harder to bear than injustice from our fellow-men. It is not only the pain of loss: there is the feeling of humiliation and injustice, and the consciousness of our rights asserts itself. In what our fellow-creatures do to us, it is not easy at once to recognise the will of God, who thus allows us to be tried, to see **if we have truly taken Christ as our example. Let us study that example**. From Him we may learn what it was that gave Him the power to bear injuries patiently.<sup>5</sup> [emphases mine]

In Chapter 5, I included the song which I had written to help me remember that God's “ultimate intention” in all things was to conform us to the likeness of Jesus Christ. I am including

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<sup>3</sup>“The word ‘example’ is used also to refer to an alphabet exercise by which children learned to write [by copying the example].” Quoted by Hurtado in “Jesus Death as Paradigmatic . . .” from Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 199.

<sup>4</sup>Hurtado, “Jesus' Death as Paradigmatic in the New Testament”.

<sup>5</sup>Andrew Murray, *Like Christ* (Minneapolis, MI: Bethany House Publishers, 1974) 34-35.

below an amplified part of this song, this time encouraging all readers to apply it as a prayer and a proclamation of praise to what we see as suffering in our lives (at present or in our memories).

Lord, come and touch afresh my eyes That I more clearly see  
 In ev'rything that comes my way [**including all suffering**] Your perfect love for me.  
 That I may know no bitterness Nor ever complain, [**about my suffering**]  
 But always full of thankfulness, Your goodness I'll proclaim.  
 I praise You, Lord, You've planned ev'rything [**including all my suffering**]  
 To make a wonderful change in me.  
 Lord Jesus Christ, to become like You – O, what a glorious destiny!

Again, let us realize that we cannot follow the example of Jesus by our own determination or strength of character. He has to change us. Nevertheless, we are commanded and urged many times in Scripture to be conformed or transformed to His likeness. That requires that we repent of anything that the Holy Spirit convicts us is not an expression of His nature (everything not in line with the paradigm of the Cross). Thus, at the first sign of suffering possibly heading our way, let us believe that it is part of God's love and His plan for us. Let us praise Him that He will use any suffering to conform us to the likeness of Jesus in His suffering and death. (I need to sing this song often to remind me to do this.)

Paul had become so identified with Christ in His sufferings that He could say, "Join with others in following my example . . ." (Phil. 3:17) He had just declared his passion to know Christ, to know the fellowship of His sufferings, and to be conformed to His death (v.10). Evidently, he had been so conformed to Jesus' suffering that others could follow the paradigm of the Cross by looking to Paul's life as an example. To what extent can others see Jesus' nature expressed in our lives—including His attitude toward suffering? To what extent can others follow our passion to be conformed to Jesus' death?

In Galatians 6:17, Paul demands that no one give him further troubles, for "I bear the marks [*stigmata*] of Jesus on my body".

The image invoked in the Greek term *stigmata* here may be that of the branding of slaves, . . . and the reference is probably to the bodily effects on Paul of the sort of experiences that he itemises in 2 Corinthians 11:23-27. . . . So, although the "stigmata" here do not imply that the marks of Paul's sufferings correspond to the wounds of Jesus, the statement does reflect Paul's view of his sufferings as thoroughly for Jesus and as affording him the chance to demonstrate his allegiance to the crucified Jesus.<sup>6</sup>

In the following verse, whatever theological problems are contained in the phrase "what is still lacking", it is clear that Paul identified his suffering with that of Jesus and that he lived out the paradigm of the Cross in order to bless the Church:

Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. (Col. 1 :24)

Similarly, Paul was so conformed to Jesus' sufferings that Jesus' life continuously flowed out through Paul to bring life to others:

We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. *We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.* For we who are alive are *always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.* (2 Cor. 4:8-12)

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<sup>6</sup>Hurtado, <http://www.ex.ac.uk/~mahigton/Hurtado.rtf>

**Many of us would love to have Paul's powerful anointing. Perhaps, we first must become like Paul in his identification with Jesus' suffering.**

Rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings. (1 Peter 4:13)

Even though it seems strange to think of rejoicing in our suffering (even sounds masochistic!), Scripture commands us to do so. Starting off by being “faithful in little” (Luke 19:17), we can ask the Holy Spirit to enable us respond with joy to the suffering we experience daily, such as others’ selfishness, rudeness, or criticism.

Suggestion: Read Chapter 12 again—“Brokenness Releases God’s Glory”, asking the Lord to break you further to let His glory within you be expressed more fully to others. In that breaking, ask Him to help you be willing to suffer if necessary—even to rejoice in that suffering, knowing that His glory is being released through your brokenness.

As I wrote and prayed about this chapter on suffering, I kept thinking about how much of our suffering is not for Christ but comes from not receiving what we deem we need and what we figure is our right to expect. I cannot escape the conviction that we have to be willing to leave all our emotional “needs” at the Cross and to expect the Lord to meet our needs as we focus on Him and are being conformed to His likeness. If we are conformed more and more to Jesus’ likeness, should we not expect to be able to give up all expectations from others and love them with His completely unselfish and unconditional love? There is much about these things to ponder and address at another time. In any case, in our seeking to love everyone according to the paradigm of the Cross, let us include in our prayers the following:

- (1) daily confession of our willingness to suffer for each one if necessary.
- (2) asking for help not to take on any suffering that is not His perfect will for us<sup>7</sup>.
- (3) seeking the Lord for the grace to be like Jesus in our response to suffering and to rejoice as we endure suffering for others.

I have told you this so that ***my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete***. My command is this: Love each other as ***I have loved you***. Greater love has no one than this, that he ***lay down his life*** for his friends. [Dying usually includes suffering!] (John 15: 11-13)

Finally, let us contemplate Paul’s triumphant response to the suffering in his life by **making his proclamation our own; let us worship the Lord for His amazing and powerful love—much more powerful than the worst suffering we could imagine!**

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

***No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us***. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:35-39)

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<sup>7</sup>I plan to discuss this issue in a chapter on “burden bearing”. Many like me through empathy and a tendency to be a “fixer” take on burdens that are not intended for them. Along with this, we need to know how to deal with “jerks” and “leeches” and still be willing to lay down our lives.