

Paul and Suffering

The Apostle Paul's was well acquainted with much pain and suffering. The suffering was intense and he was not afraid to talk about it in his writings. When we read through the book of Acts and Paul's epistles, we see a man that God used in amazing ways for His glory. However, we also see a man who suffered and struggled with the same things that you and I do.

He suffered with physical pain from the many beatings and attacks from angry mobs and misguided religious zealots. He suffered emotional pain from depression brought on by loneliness and being betrayed by close friends. There were times when he experienced pain and asked God to take it away, but He didn't do it because it served a greater purpose.

C.S. Lewis, the Oxford scholar and Christian apologist, was acquainted with pain and suffering as well. He was asked to write a book on the topic in 1940. The book was entitled *The Problem of Pain*. In 1941, Lewis began giving a series of talks on BBC radio which eventually became the book *Mere Christianity*. His talks were so popular with the British people who were suffering from the horrors of World War II. The people needed hope in the midst of such evil and pain.

However, C.S. Lewis' greatest insights into grief would come with the loss of Joy, his wife of only three years, in 1960. Under a pseudonym, he wrote about his heartache in losing the love of his life. The book came out with the title, *A Grief Observed*. Lewis referred to Paul's writings often in the work as he sorted through the pain and suffering in missing Joy. He dealt with the wide range of emotions from loneliness to sadness and sometimes even fear. He said, "No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear."

FEAR

Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 2:1-3 that he also struggled with fear. Paul says, "And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling." Whether he was intimidated by the situation or the people is not really clear. However, something had caused him to experience fear. For C.S. Lewis, it was the loss of his wife, the sorrow of grief and having to face it every day. In fact, Lewis went on to say, "Part of every misery is, so to speak, the misery's shadow or reflection: the fact that you don't merely suffer but have to keep on thinking about the fact that you suffer. I not only live each endless day in grief, but live each day thinking about living each day in grief" (C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*).

Why did Paul experience fear? After all, was it not Paul who said in Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me"? The answer is simple, he was human. Humans are not omnipotent. We are frail and flawed. Even when we know the truths of God and that He cares for us, we are still weak at times. We struggle with the distance between the ideal and the real. Paul gives us a glimpse into his own life and we realize that he was strong in Christ, however, his humanity was still a part of him.

DEPRESSION

Secondly, Paul experienced depression. In 2 Corinthians 7:6-7, "But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus; and not only by his coming, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted in you, as he reported to us your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me; so that I rejoiced even more." Yes, Christians get depressed. Sometimes the disappointments or pressures of life can be overwhelming to us and we cannot cope. It does not mean it has to be a permanent thing, but it happens. Sometimes Christians are in denial over the matter because it carries a stigma, or so they think. Granted, at times there is a physical problem that requires medication, however, Christians can still struggle with depression even if there is nothing chemically wrong. It is just a part of life. God has shown us in the Scriptures through Paul's words that depression is a human battle. Paul understood this very real emotion.

C.S. Lewis said, "Talk to me about the truth of religion and I'll listen gladly. Talk to me about the duty of religion and I'll listen submissively. But don't come talking to me about the consolations of religion or I shall suspect that you don't understand" (C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*).

Not only did a Christian theologian and the Apostle Paul understand, but the Lord understands. Listen to what the writer of Hebrews says in Hebrews 4:14-16:

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need.

PHYSICAL SUFFERING

Paul suffered unimaginable physical pain and suffering at the hands of misguided men. When you read his account in 2 Corinthians 11:23-28, it is a wonder that he even survived.

Are they servants of Christ? (I speak as if insane) I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night

and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure upon me of concern for all the churches.

No one really knows what the Apostle Paul looked like, however, his body must have been a wreck from having been punished like that. And notice that he also had the added pressure of his concern for all the churches. He had a pastor's heart for the people. Paul must have lived with terrible pain everyday because of what he had been through—for the cause of Christ!

Paul mentions a "thorn in the flesh" in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 that he prayed for God to heal, or take away. We don't know what the "thorn" was, but it was painful enough that Paul asked God to heal him. The Lord's response was that His grace was sufficient for Paul. Paul knew what it was like to ask God to take away a pain of some kind and not have the request answered like he wanted. There came a point when there was not sense asking for the ailment to be removed because God had other plans and that it was something Paul would have to live with.

LONELINESS AND BETRAYAL

Read Paul's words in 2 Timothy 4:9-17. Notice how he says he felt alone in his captivity and betrayed by Demas. He is coming to the end of his life but he wants to see Mark again. Earlier they had been estranged (Acts 15:37-39), but God had healed their relationship and now Mark was an encouragement to Paul. Notice how hurt he was by what Alexander the coppersmith. When he needed for someone to stand with him when he made his defense, no one supported him. However, notice the forgiveness he had for them by not wanting it to count against them (v. 16). But he says that the Lord stood by him and gave him strength.

Make every effort to come to me soon; for Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Pick up Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for service. But Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus. When you come bring the cloak which I left at Troas with Carpus, and the books, especially the parchments. Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. Be on guard against him yourself, for he vigorously opposed our teaching. At my first defense no one supported me, but all deserted me; may it not be counted against them. But the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me, in order that through me the proclamation might be fully accomplished, and that all the Gentiles might hear; and I was delivered out of the lion's mouth.

FORGIVENESS

Sometimes, the pain that we suffer from comes from unforgiveness in our own hearts for someone. When we do not forgive someone when they have offended us, then we will be the ones who suffer. Paul reminds us that we have “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Every human being has sinned against a holy God and every one of us is capable of hurting someone else. Colossians 3:8-10 says:

But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices.

Finally, Paul says that we should forgive others when they hurt us because we have to remember that God forgave us. Colossians 3:12-13 says:

And so, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.

POINTS FOR HOME

- Pain and suffering are a real part of life that every human being will deal with at some point in their life. Christians are not immune. Some suffer more than others and with different things. But, we will all suffer. Paul even says that if we have a relationship with Jesus Christ, then we will suffer with him and he with us (Philippians 3:8-11)
- God is sovereign. He has a greater plan than we can conceive of. He is the potter and we are the clay (Romans 9:19-21).
- God’s plans and ways are far greater than our minds can conceive of. Just because we don’t fully understand why pain and suffering has come our way, we must trust God because He does (Romans 11:33-36).