

St. Paul on Suffering

We all experience suffering although not in equal portions. When the blows of financial hardships, grave illness, or death strike, they often feel unbearable. There is a general awareness that suffering is fitting in some collective or general sense. In a world that is drowning in an ocean of evil, the relationship of sin to suffering seems obvious. However, the unsolved mystery of suffering is not why we must suffer, but why *I* am suffering at this moment. “Why me?” Therefore the distribution of suffering is the mystery to us, not its existence. This essay attempts to explore this mystery from St. Paul’s perspective without any pretense that this reflection exhausts the subject.

Before we examine this subject it must also be affirmed at the outset that, while there is a general connection between sin and suffering, there is frequently no connection in particular cases. Jesus made that very clear:

“As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him’” (Jn 9:1-3).

In Jesus’ words we find another discovery. God permits suffering so that his works may be made manifest *in us*. How this mystery works in our lives is frequently beyond our grasp in the midst of suffering. As someone observed humorously: “When you are up to your neck in alligators it is difficult to remember your job was to drain the swamp!” The challenges of financial losses, feeling useless, or facing the prospect of death can be very painful.

St. Paul’s grappling with the mystery of suffering begins with Christ, because the Apostle views suffering within the context of the cross. In his letter to the Philippians he speaks of Jesus’ suffering from two points of view: first from the perspective of his humility and suffering, and secondly with a focus on his glorification.

Jesus’ humility and suffering

“who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross”¹ (Phil 2:6-8).

Jesus’ Glorification

“Therefore God has highly exalted him² and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and

¹ Crucifixion was the ultimate degrading form of death reserved for slaves and insurrectionists.

² The Father exalted Jesus by raising him from the dead, enthroning him in heaven, and clothing his humanity with the divine glory.

under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father” (Phil 2:9-11).

Jesus’ suffering, which the saint called the folly of the cross, was central in St. Paul’s preaching: “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ... For Jews demand signs [stupendous miracles] and Greeks seek wisdom [innovative explanations of the world], but *we preach Christ crucified*, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Cor 1:18, 22-25).

Although St. Paul uses the cross as his point of departure, he also underscored its connection with the perfection of Jesus’ human nature and our salvation. Consider his insightful reflection on Jesus’ agony in Gethsemane where he submissively offered the priestly sacrifice of himself to the Father:

“In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, *he learned obedience through what he suffered*; and *begin made perfect* he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek” (Heb 5:7-10).

St. Paul also drew on the Greek version of Psalm 8:4-6 to highlight Jesus’ human nature and his suffering on our behalf:

“[Jesus] was made a little lower than the angels [in his human nature], crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one. For it was fitting that he [the Father], for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer [Christ] of their salvation perfect through suffering. ... For because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted [to sin, discouragement, and despair]” (Heb 2:9-10, 18).

Suffering was not an academic subject with St. Paul. It was an experience he tasted ending with his martyrdom. Once he was scourged with 39 lashes, three times he was beaten with rods, and he was stoned once. He suffered shipwreck three times and faced drowning adrift in the sea for a night and a day. The Jews who wanted to kill him hounded him across the Roman Empire, and false brethren betrayed him (2 Cor 11:24-28). St. Paul acknowledged, “weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities” (2 Cor 12:10).

The Apostle never asked, “Why me?” Similarly, he never attempted to explain to suffering Christians, “Why you?” Rather he focused on the inner meaning of suffering, which explains how St. Paul and other Christians could endure so many struggles and maintain their positiveness and inner peace.

St. Paul understood that when our suffering is united with Christ's suffering it is a redemptive privilege. The mission of Christians is to become like Christ by patiently uniting our suffering to Christ:

"For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you *patiently endure* the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort" (2 Cor 1:5-7).

He also treats this subject wonderfully in his letter to the Galatians. Using himself as an example, the Apostle explains that when our sufferings are united to the cross of Christ we die to the slavery of sin and are transformed into Christ:

"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20).

Subsequently, Paul praised the privilege of suffering in Christ:

"But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal 6:14).

In his letter to the Philippians the saint tells us how he is torn between life and death. It is the perspective of the faithful Christian who longs to be united with his Lord in heaven, but also desires to work and suffer for the benefit of others. Like St. Paul we are called to trust ourselves entirely into God's hands when we face the uncertainty of enduring the trials of life. Only God's plan is the perfect plan for our life.

"For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If it is to be life in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account" (Phil 1:21-23).

These sentiments find an echo in his letter to the Colossians, where the Apostle draws on a common theme – joy in the midst of suffering (Mt 5:11-12; Acts 5:41; 1 Pet 4:13).

"Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (Col 1:24).

"What is lacking" is uniting our suffering to Jesus' Passion. This grace transforms us into Christ and then flows through us to bring our Lord to others.

In these verses we discover another mystery of the Father's love. He chooses to incorporate us into his divine Son and into the Family business of the Blessed Trinity, which is the salvation of souls. St. Paul could "rejoice" in his suffering because in his surrender he was conformed to his crucified Lord and cooperated with Jesus in the salvation of souls. Here we find meaning in our trials.

Allow me to illustrate. Recently I learned that a dear friend, a mother of four, is grappling with a virulent attack of cancer. This young woman is facing a frightening ordeal, but her focus is on others. She shared with my wife that she is offering her suffering for the success of one of the ministries at our parish. Her offering doesn't make the difficulties connected with this disease magically disappear. But by uniting her suffering with Christ, she not only becomes more Christ-like, but she also becomes a vehicle through which grace flows into her family, our parish, and beyond.

Therefore, St. Paul could urge the first Christians

“For the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake” (Phil 1:29).

The Apostle understands that suffering for Christ's sake purifies us of selfishness and unites us to Jesus' redemptive work. Then speaking of himself he added:

“I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ. ... and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead” (Phil 3:8, 10-11).

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