

Man of Sorrows: If We Share in His Suffering

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Romans 8:14-17, Colossians 1:24

Wait...did Romans 8:17 just say that if we want to experience God's glory we have to choose suffering? "We are heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, IF we share in his sufferings IN ORDER THAT we might also share in his glories." It sounds like Paul is saying, "Hey everyone if you are God's child and you want to share in his glory, you've got to suffer."

And if that's what Paul's saying, is this really what you want to hear when you come to church on Sunday morning? You are all busy and stressed out already. Each of you have full lives with problems and concerns. But despite your busyness, you made it here this morning. You got up, you cleaned yourself off, many of you corralled the kids, you put yourself together and made your way here. You did all that just to have Paul say, you must share in Christ's sufferings! Peter, I thought you were a minister of the gospel? How is this good news!?

"We are heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, IF we share in his sufferings IN ORDER THAT we might also share in his glories." It's a remarkable sentence. Paul is not just saying that some suffering is inevitable in this life. Paul's not just saying, "Look, life is full of suffering and trouble and hardship, but don't worry, you'll get through." Paul is saying the path to the glory of God involves us choosing to suffer with Christ. If we share in his sufferings we will share in his glory, the implication being that if we don't share in his sufferings, we will miss out on the fullness of his glory. So, as an heir of God and a co-heir with Christ, make it your intention to participate in the sufferings of Christ. Choose suffering.

And this isn't the only place where Paul says things like that. There are multiple places in his writings where Paul talks about suffering almost as if it's a good thing. Here's one: Philippians 3:10 – "I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings." I want to participate in Christ's sufferings. Peter sometimes says stuff like this too. Here's Peter in 1 Peter 4:13 – "rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed." Rejoice when you participate in Christ's sufferings. There too it sounds like participation in Christ's sufferings is a necessary part of his glory. And then there's Colossians 1:24, the other passage I read a moment ago. In this passage Paul not only rejoices in his sufferings, but he suggests that our suffering completes some unfinished work of Jesus. Listen: "I rejoice in what I am suffering for you and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions." Somehow Paul says our sufferings complete something that Christ did not complete. Put all of this together, and it reinforces and confirms the message of Romans 8:17: suffering is somehow an important part of how we share in Christ and his glory.

How do we make sense of this? I think that is such an important question. If we can answer this question, or at least come to a deeper understanding of this mystery, we will root ourselves more deeply in the life and joy of Christ. First, let me say what I have already said in this sermon series and what I'm sure I will say again: suffering is not a good thing. These Bible texts are not teaching that suffering is good. The Bible is not saying, "Hey these terrible events in your life that made you suffer, death, disease, war, conflict, they are actually good things!" Not at all! Suffering is the result of sin. Suffering is in this world as the result of human sin and human injustice. But Jesus changed our relationship to our suffering. Jesus took an evil tool of suffering and torture, the cross, and turned it into a tool of his victory. Jesus won his victory over suffering by suffering. So Paul is suggesting that our suffering, though terrible, becomes an opportunity for us to work good, or more precisely, for God to work good through us. We share in Christ's sufferings so that we can also share in his glory.

Let me also clarify what part of Christ's sufferings we share. When Paul talks about us sharing Christ's sufferings, there is only a certain part of Christ's sufferings we can share. When he suffered and died on the cross Jesus suffered for two things. He carried our sins and our miseries. Do you know the difference between sins and miseries? It's a distinction made in the catechism question and answer 2. Sins are the things we do wrong. Sins are our transgressions against God's will. Miseries are the miserable results of the sin. When a

parent abuses a child and calls her worthless, that's a sin. The misery is the insecurity and anxiety that the child ends up carrying for the rest of her life. On the cross Jesus bore both the guilt of our sins and the pain of our misery.

We human beings can't share in Christ's suffering for sin. When Paul says that our suffering can fill up what is lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, he's not suggesting that there is something lacking in Christ's sacrifice for our sins. In his suffering on the cross, Jesus didn't pay for 80% of our sins and now we have to pay for 20%; in his suffering on the cross, Jesus paid it all. "My sin, O the bliss of this glorious thought, my sin not the part but the whole is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more." The hymn has it right.

But misery is different. Christ paid the debt of our sin. In Christ our sin is taken from us. But what about the misery created by sin? Is that gone? One look at the evening news, one look at the prayer requests in our bulletin and you know that misery is still very much with us. It's in dealing with the world's misery that we can share Christ's sufferings. It's here, in dealing with the world's misery that as members of Christ's body we can help him complete his work. It's here that we can fill up in our bodies what is lacking in his afflictions. Miseries come into our life, and as terrible as they are, as chaotic as they are, as unfair as they might be, in Christ, they are an opportunity for us to continue his work.

Let me close this sermon by suggesting three things we can do that allow us to share in Christ's suffering in a way that moves towards his glory. First I want to say that when it comes to dealing with your suffering, one of the most important, most Christ-like things you can do is absorb. In Christ, you are a sponge. Think of yourself as holy sponges. When misery spills into your life, or into the life of someone close to you, in Christ you have the power of absorption. You can absorb some of the pain into yourself and bear it away. Think of your suffering from a Spiritual perspective, think of it in terms of the struggle between good and evil. Whenever suffering and misery come into your life, you are part of that Spiritual struggle. In that Spiritual battle, the evil one wants you to do the opposite of absorb, the evil one wants you to amplify the misery. He wants you to amplify your suffering into frustration and rage. He wants you to amplify your misery into bitterness and isolation. He wants you to amplify your suffering into a sense of entitlement and grievance so that you stomp through this world, scowling and angry.

Jesus wants you to absorb. Jesus does many things on the cross, but one of the most important is the way he absorbs our misery. Isaiah 53: "Surely he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows." He didn't amplify our sins and sorrows; he bore them. If Jesus had amplified the grief and sorrow and misery that fell on him on the cross, it would have been an explosion. It would have been an explosion of anger and judgment that would have consumed us all. But that's not what Jesus did. He absorbed all the abuse and the rage and the bitterness and returned forgiveness grace, hope, love, life. And in so doing he set the powers of evil reeling.

And that's what you can do too. You can be a sponge for Jesus. When you experience misery and suffering instead of amplifying you absorb the misery and return grace, and kindness, and faith and hope, you are dealing evil a powerful blow. You are a holy sponge, absorbing a little of the world's pain and giving out love, absorbing a little of the world's darkness and giving out light. I know that some of you have more misery in life than you can handle. You say Peter I can't absorb any more; I'm saturated. I hear you. Blessed are you. That's where the body of Christ comes in. That's where those of us who have a little capacity can come along side you and absorb a little of what you're dealing with. Together as the body of Christ we can complete in our body (which is Christ's body!) what is still lacking in his afflictions.

The older I get the more I realize how much of my work as a Christian and as a pastor is absorption. It's so central to a pastor's work and, I think, so central to the work of ordinary Christian people. You come alongside of people and you absorb their pain, and then you speak gentle words of hope, gentle words of Jesus into their lives. It's a slow cleanup. We can only absorb a little at a time, but when we all do it and we do it together we are sharing in Christ's sufferings in a way that is very, very good.

One little qualifier here. When we absorb, it's important to distinguish between sin and misery. We absorb people's misery, but we don't absorb the cause of the misery. If someone hurts us, we absorb the pain of that hurt, but that doesn't mean we don't speak out against the sin. If someone loses a loved one to cancer, we walk beside them and absorb some of the pain, but that doesn't mean we don't look for a cure. It's the same dynamic you see in Christian forgiveness. When you forgive, you absorb the pain of what that person did to you. You give up your need for vengeance. You give up your need to make that person hurt the way you hurt;

that's what you absorb. But that doesn't mean you don't hold them accountable for their sin. It's just that you do it after the misery has been absorbed. You do it from a place of love instead of rage.

The second way we share in Christ's sufferings is lament. You can't just absorb; you also need to lament. If all you do is absorb, if you just take in the hurt you receive without letting anything out, you will become hard. Lament is a safe and biblical way to offload your sadness and your anger without amplifying it. Lament is a tool, a spiritual tool that guards you from amplification. Jesus doesn't amplify the hurt he receives, but he does lament. He cries out to God on the cross, 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me.' He also shares some of his pain out to his friends. Remember what he says to Peter, James and John in the garden: "My soul is overwhelmed to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." Jesus wants his closest friends to share a little of his overwhelming sorrow. If you try to absorb all the pain in your life and just keep it inside you, you will not do well. You will harden. Your soul will become exhausted. You will end up depressed. We need to share our sorrows with God and with each other. If we do not lament, we lose our vulnerability and without vulnerability we lose our capacity to love.

The final part of our sharing Christ's sufferings in order that we can share in his glory is learning the ability to rejoice in our sufferings. Not rejoice for our sufferings, but rejoice in them. To rejoice in the face of them. To rejoice in spite of them. That's a Biblical call. Philippians 4: "Rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again rejoice." I Peter 4: "Rejoice that you participate in Christ's sufferings." Here's what that means. Here's what that looks like. When you are going through suffering, and you are able to absorb it, and you are able to lament, honestly express to God and others how much you hurt, but also, in the middle of that place, in the face of your tears, you can express a joy and a hope that is rooted in Christ and his promises, you are living Romans 8:17. You are sharing in Christ's suffering AND his glory.

When I think of a picture of that, I think of when I visited Bea Hoek in the hospital just before she died. Not all of you know Bea. Many of you do. She was a beloved member of our congregation who died at the end of January. She was on the fifth floor of Meijer Heart in one of the big rooms they have up there. When I came in, the room was packed with kids and grandkids. And they were all suffering, there was lots of tears, but they were doing it in Christ. They were absorbing the pain of this suffering, this loss of a person they loved. They were also lamenting; they talked about how much they loved Bea and how it would be hard to lose her. Their vigil lasted for a couple of days and when she died, her son John was reading Psalm 116 to her. Psalm 116 is a Psalm of hope and deliverance and joy. John was reading the Psalm and came to verse 15 which says this: "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful servants." At that moment Bea died. I don't think that was a coincidence, do you? That's a picture of Romans 8:17, they were sharing in the sufferings of Christ, and so God gave them (and us too) a glimpse of his glory. The glory they saw was just a small foretaste of the greater glory prepared for all of us who walk this road with him.

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