

The Grace of God for His Suffering Church

Revelation 2:8-11

- Now that Christ has addressed the loveless church at Ephesus, we will study the suffering church at Smyrna. Obviously, we have much to learn from each of these instructions.
 - There IS a connection . . . *if you begin to love, you will also suffer.*
 - For our work and activity to be pleasing to God and useful to others, it must be done in love. Without love, we are nothing.
 - Everyone suffers; life is hard. Learning to do hard things well, to suffer in a godly way, does not come naturally to us; we must be taught and instructed and learn by experience how to become this kind of person
- What would you say to suffering believers? (We have a responsibility to relieve suffering, in the name of Christ, rather than increase suffering. This is the essence of grace in action)
 - Grin and bear it? Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die?
 - Everybody hurts? We are by nature soft, comfortable, and have an aversion to pain and hurt
 - To Smyrna, Jesus says nothing that is critical or negative, though they were not perfect
- Jesus prepares the church at Smyrna to mature them; to fortify and strengthen them:
 - This is what you are going to face. This is how you need to respond.
 - Grace for your suffering . . . this is the bigger story of the Bible, is it not?
 - Are you willing to listen to what the Spirit says to the churches?
 - My grace is sufficient for you
- If we would hear what the Spirit says to us in the midst of our suffering, these situations of testing, which create fear and anxiety and tempt us to become angry, bitter, and hurtful, can be transformed to actually result in us becoming humble, confident, hopeful, and loving in the midst of these circumstances.

1. **The Grace of Christ's Position:** What is the vantage point of the One who speaks and assesses us? His providence, His sovereignty: *suffering perks up our ears; we start making some calls*, doing some research... How do I get help?
 - a. *When we are hurting, we are on dangerous ground: bitterness, anger, self-pity, apathy; to begin to inflict suffering and pain upon others.*
 - b. Do not take His introduction lightly (review Rev. 1:4-8)
 - i. Who are you gonna go to? Listen to? Trust?
 - c. He is the first and the last: the eternal one, the reference point, the transcendent
 - d. He was dead, and He has come to life.
 - i. Romans 1:4 and Isaiah 6: High and Lofty:
 - ii. He is in absolute control. He is omnipotent; A source of life!
 - iii. He loves us. (he is with us, among us; walking around)
 1. What He went through - tribulation, poverty, blasphemy
 2. Why He went through it - to glorify God and rescue us
 - e. In your suffering, look at who HE is...
 - i. So maybe one point of suffering is to compel me to look up and outside of myself . . . to Christ, in faith and in hearing
 - ii. To press me to NEED him . . . squeezed . . . empties us of false self (Introduces me to myself!) to humble me, to look up instead of down
 - iii. How do I stop the pain? **Paul prays three times for the thorn to be removed**
 1. We had the sentence of death within ourselves, so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead (2 Cor. 1:9)
 - f. To know Him, see Him, to know that He is here, that He is omnipotent, and that He cares . . . Psalm 27:1: HUMILIATION is the pathway to freedom from self
 - i. Hey, look at me! Look at me.
 - ii. *The One who speaks is the One who precedes all creation and will remain when all else is gone; preexistent and eternal, similar to John 1- High Christology here is not mere cosmetics. How refreshing to know that HE IS RISEN*
 - iii. Peter began to sink when he took his eyes off Jesus
 - iv. Welcome your trials as friends. Rejoice in your high position!

2. The Grace of Christ's Provision

- a. Jesus Provides Awareness: assessment. *I know your tribulation*
 - i. This gives us His awareness and empathy: it gives us understanding
 - ii. This person is aware . . . I know what you are going through; you are not invisible . . . hidden . . . seen . . . loved . . . someone who has gone before - to know who He is and that He knows, is really enough
 - iii. Tribulation: intense, lengthy persecution; the heat of Rome's persecution of the church
 - iv. Poverty: the word implies basic survival
 - v. Blasphemy: slander
 - 1. By those who say they are Jews, but are actually a synagogue of Satan: .CONSIDER THE SOURCE: he is a liar; accuser; deceiver
 - a. Not of God: Romans 9:6-8: not all of Israel are Israel
 - b. But rather of the evil one
 - 2. Jesus knows not just the information, but He knows by experience; thus, we can approach His throne of grace with confidence - we have a God who has suffered for us!
- b. Jesus provides resources . . . But you are rich (reckon what I have already given you by grace) RESOURCES - check your daily balance;
 - i. What has God provided that we are not aware of?
 - ii. What are the true riches? Character, Purpose, Meaning, Love
 - 1. Pull out the scales- what do you have?
 - 2. This is a church; a community, a family, together they have the grace of each other . . . Galatians 6
- c. Therefore, **do not be afraid** . . . of what you are going through or about to suffer
 - i. God is teaching me and shaping me to become wealthier spiritually; to form me into Christ - it's really about who you become in the process
 - 1. Ephesians 1: "God our Father has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ."
 - a. Chosen before the foundation of the world
 - b. In love, He predestined us to be adopted to Himself
 - c. He made known to us the mystery of His will
 - d. We have obtained an inheritance
 - e. Redemption through His blood,
 - f. The forgiveness of sins
 - g. Sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of Promise

2. Galatians 5: 22-23
 - a. Love, Joy, peace; patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control. .
 - b. He is making me richer in humility, and faith, hope, and love . . .and impact, and purpose, and . . .
3. 1 Timothy 6: Fix your hope on God, who richly supplies us with all good things to enjoy. *When Tim Keller suffered, it opened his eyes to all the joyful things around us that we didn't notice before . . .*
- ii. God is increasing my wealth. God is making me richer! (2 Cor. 4:16-18) now and later . .
 1. Will result in praise and honor and glory - 1 Peter 1
 2. 2 Corinthians 4 and 5
 3. Luke 12:32
- d. He provides Himself and His people- all of God is more than enough . .

3. **The Grace of Christ's Promises:** now and later - he gives them honesty . .
 - a. Do not fear: suffering creates a lot of fear and anxiety and questions; Jesus addresses this head on . . with reasons not to fear
 - b. What you are about to suffer, they are already suffering. But wait, more!
 - i. They are not on the carousel of progress . . it is going to get worse.
 - ii. The devil is about to cast some of you in prison; some will die
 1. What does this mean?
 2. How will they respond?
 - c. The suffering is limited: it has an expiration date
 - i. There is an end to it.
 1. Ten days . . ten epic periods of time? Depths?
 2. Oh Lord, how long?
 - a. A day's training on earth, for an eternity in heaven.
 - d. The suffering is purposeful: *if God loves the church in the USA, why doesn't he make them suffer? . . .*
 - i. Suffering is good for our sanctification, growth, and maturity
 - ii. You will be tested
 1. Reveals
 2. Refines . .
 3. Redefines how you see and interpret life . . . Romans 5
 - a. The goal is to mature me and make me like Christ
 - b. This cannot take place without pressure; heat . .

- e. Be faithful unto death
 - i. Some of them will die; they will be martyred.
 - ii. Continue to trust and obey; to lean upon and cling to Christ
 - 1. Hold onto Him,. .the one who died but now lives
 - iii. To the one who overcomes . . . but how??
- f. I will give you the crown of life: you will be victorious and triumphant
 - i. You will be in the Paradise of God - the tree of life! (add these up)
 - ii. You will have the crown of life: given by grace, permanent!
 - 1. It will be worth it all
 - 2. A cosmic and personal REDO- Redemption
 - 3. Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal
- g. Will not be hurt by the second death , . .INVINCIBLE - Rev. 20:14; 21:8
 - i. Your body, yes. The first death is a separation of soul and body.
 - ii. Your soul, no. The second death is the separation of the soul from God, for all eternity.
 - 1. Cosmic, Utter, Final and Eternal Rejection.
- h. "Those who are born twice need only die once; those who are born only once will die twice"
- i. Our souls will be with God, body and soul will be re-united; we shall be like Him

*Don't all the great stories end this way?

- By His grace . . You get His life.
- He rewards you with the crown of life

God has a really good track record when it comes to His care and support of the suffering.

There is an infinite contrast between those who suffer for His name's sake and those who refuse to trust Him, follow Him, and take up their cross daily and follow Jesus.

Strategies to increase your capacity to suffer well, or rather, respond in a way which glorifies God:

- Spend time with the lowly - get your head on straight and learn from them. Do not avoid them; make eye contact; see them, love them, interact with them. Minister to them; it is one thing to read a book, preach a message on suffering. It is next level to be beside them and with them . . . that's where you get 'school of hard knocks' learning. From the head down into the heart and emotions,
- Self - Appoint suffering in certain stages; don't allow yourself ever to get too comfortable or soft.
 - Force yourself into uncomfortable situations;
- Memorize and Meditate on the Word - an arsenal to adjust your thinking to reality in preparation . . .
 - John 16:33; Romans 8:28; John 14:1; Isaiah 53; Psalm 27; Psalm 23; 1 John 4:4
- Study Jesus, the suffering servant; Job; Joseph; Paul, etc, etc.
- Sing hymns and songs related to suffering; read the Puritans

Tim Keller on Suffering:

"When we endure suffering with all the patience we can muster, we trust God as God, and that glorifies Him, regardless of any other results we can discern."

"Suffering, though painful, can actually help you reach your life's goal and complete your life story."

"Because Christianity gives us an assured hope that we will have infinitely greater and unending love relationships (with God first and foremost but with others too), this gives us not only a greater basis for hope, but it also gives greater room to express our sorrow. We don't have to detach our hearts from loved ones the way the ancient and modern stoics have done in order to protect themselves emotionally from the hopelessness of death."

The Bible presents God's relationship to suffering as both "stronger" and "weaker," as it were, than does any other religion. On the one hand, God is absolutely sovereign over suffering. It's never out of his control. It's always part of his plan. On the other hand, God has come into the world himself and actually suffered with us. No other religion says that God is both a sovereign *and* a suffering God. This is the theological foundation for why Christians can be so realistic and yet so hopeful about suffering at the same time."

“To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable.”
(CS Lewis)

Julie Walsh:

July 7, 1966, The Swing. When I was a child, my mom would take my sister Frances and me to the swings in the park. I loved being pushed on the swing by someone I trusted. I felt as if I were flying, airborne, without a care in the world. I would cry out, “Higher, Mommy, higher!”

I remember one day, though, when it was just my big sister and me at the park. Frances pushed me on my swing for a while and then got tired and sat down on the grass. A boy who was known as the neighborhood bully came up behind me and began to push my swing. I was terrified. He wasn’t pushing it any higher than my sister had, but I didn’t trust him. I cried and cried until my sister told him to stop.

The matter, you see, came down to a five-letter word: trust. Trust made flying high in the air an exhilarating experience, and when trust was absent, the swing turned into a nightmare. Who was pushing the swing made all the difference in the world. The heart behind the hands pushing the swing changed everything.

