

Trinity Lutheran Church, Gillette, WY
September 21, 2008

Suffering for Christ

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, amen. The text for the sermon this morning comes from the Epistle, which was read earlier.

In today's religious marketplace, churches are selling success – financial, social, bodily, and spiritual success. With these teachings, there is no room for suffering. Rather, suffering is seen by some as a sign of God's punishment, or at least the absence of His favor. In today's Epistle, we learn that suffering, especially suffering for the sake of Christ, can actually be a gift from God and serve to further His kingdom.

Paul led a long life. During this life he led, he suffered. He suffered from a thorn in the flesh, *“a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.”* Paul suffered from being imprisoned three different times in his life. Paul suffered from being shipwrecked on the island of Malta for three months on his way from Caesarea to Rome. Needless to say, Paul suffered during his life; this was just the suffering that he faced once he became a Christian following his Damascus Road conversion.

Suffering for the Christian is nothing new. It's not something that the Christian looks forward to, yet it is something that the Christian will face during their life. Not only is it something that we face, it is nothing short of a gift from God. Faith is a gift, *“granted”* to us *“for the sake of Christ.”*

Like faith, we see that suffering is a gift, though not a gift like you and I would think of. Faith is something given to us for our benefit; no one would deny that fact. But

can we say the same about suffering? Is suffering given to us for our benefit? The answer is yes. It is granted to us, as Paul says.

Most would not consider suffering a gift. When one thinks of a gift, they think of money, jewelry, a new car, but not suffering. If you had the choice between a gift of one-million dollars or suffering, your choice would be a no-brainer: you would take the money.

Paul was not your “model Christian” by any means; actually, Paul was no Christian at all. He had lived his life by the name of Saul. He knew of Jesus and had one goal in life: to stamp out Christianity and everything Christ stood for. He caused suffering to many a Christian, suffering to the point of death. Saul had everything going for him, until one fateful day on the Damascus Road. It was there that Saul met Jesus, face-to-face. It was there that Saul was converted from a non-Christian to a Christian. It was from that moment on that Paul’s life would change.

Following his conversion, Paul suffered many a thing. However, he did not count it as a curse, but rather as a blessing. This conversion left Paul with one simple message: *“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”* Paul’s suffering, while it was difficult at times, furthered the work of the Gospel. Early in our text, Paul makes mention of his imprisonment. It was not punishment for disobeying God, but a result of faithfully speaking the Word of God. That suffering for speaking the Gospel was bearing fruit. The imperial guard and all the rest had heard of Christ as a result of Paul’s suffering. Because of the message of Christ which Paul was preaching, others were becoming confident in speaking of Christ because of Paul’s suffering. Suffering like Paul talks about here is echoed throughout his epistles. We see Paul’s suffering instrumental in the

founding, the upbringing, the doctrine, and the chastisement of congregations in Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, and Colossae.

Just like Paul, you and I are called to accept the gift of suffering for the sake of the Gospel. We may suffer for the speaking the Word. We may face embarrassment, harassment, fallings out with family and friends and cold shoulders. We may face sanctions at work, restrictions in public activities. Yet we are called to *“preach the Word; be ready in season and out of season.”* We are called to *“reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.”*

Paul is not the only illustration of suffering we see in Scripture. Jesus Christ is the greatest example we see in Scripture of suffering for the sake of the Gospel.

Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ shows to us the ultimate sacrifice for the sake of the Gospel. Paul gives to us a great understanding of the work of Jesus Christ in Philippians 2: *“who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”*

Suffering for the sake of the Gospel leads us to one thing and one thing only: trust in Christ and Christ alone. Christ has suffered our same sufferings, as well as sufferings that we can never suffer. He became man and suffered what you and I were meant to suffer. Because of your sins and mine, He was harassed, humiliated, abandoned by friends, and excluded by Jewish leadership. He was arrested, imprisoned, beaten and killed, all for the sins of the world. He was damned, rejected by His Father, and suffered the torments of hell; not for His behalf, but on behalf of you, the people whom God was

making His own by the work of His Son. It is by His life, suffering, death, and resurrection that you and I have received a prize: that prize is everlasting life. That is exactly what we hear from the Gospel of John: *“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”*

Being a Christian is not about attaining success as the world counts success. Being a Christian may mean suffering for the sake of the Gospel. In every kind of suffering, we are comforted that it comes to us as a gift, just as faith comes to us as a gift. The sufferings we experience drive us to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. It is our hope as Christians to suffer and not be ashamed, for that which we suffer is far greater than what we could expect in this life; we desire to suffer for the sake of Jesus Christ and His Word, because He has suffered in our place. In Jesus’ name, amen. Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus until life everlasting, amen.