

Personal Suffering 101

Acts 21:15-36

Introduction

May I invite your attention to Paul's letter to the church at Philippi. With great passion and pathos, Paul bares his soul as he writes, in Philippians, chapter 3, verse 10a,

that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings . . .

In the New Testament there are several Greek cognates translated "knowledge, know, or knowing". One of those words is "oida," and it relates to intellectual or intuitive knowledge gained by means of propositional truth. When you take a test on Bible doctrine and get an "A+," you know certain truths intellectually.

There is another Greek word for knowledge, and it is the word "ginosko". This is a word that relates to knowing something by means of personal experience.

There is a comprehensive work in the Greek language called, *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (for the guys who are looking for something different for Father's Day, this is it – all 10 volumes!). This dictionary underscores that the biblical Greek word "ginosko" implied a personal relationship between the knower and the known, which ultimately involved the influence of the object of knowledge upon the one knowing.

In Philippians, chapter 3, verse 10, Paul says, "that I may know Him . . .!" Paul does not use "oida," meaning knowledge gained by propositional truth. In fact, he should not have used "oida," because he already knew as truth that Christ was His personal Savior. Paul used "ginosko". He is in effect, saying, "Oh that I might have such intimacy

with Jesus Christ; such a close relationship with Him, the object of my knowledge, that I ultimately am influenced by Him in every facet of my character."

Look further at chapter 4, verse 5a, where the same word is used. This use is referring to the world around you.

Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. . .

The word for "gentle spirit" means to have a humble, patient steadfastness, which is able to submit to injustice, disgrace, and maltreatment without malice or hatred. In other words, "Let your patience in the face of personal mistreatment be known to all men."

"Known," in this verse, is a form of the same verb "ginosko". The point is, you have been so influenced by the Lord whom you are intimately involved in knowing, that everyone around you knows something has happened to make you so different. And, as they get to know you, they are ultimately influenced by you.

So, when somebody says, "I just want to know Christ," what do they mean? What should they mean?

Properly interpreted, it means to live so closely to Christ, by being submissive to Him, being transparent before Him, and desiring to please Him that we begin to act like, sound like, and respond like He did when He walked on planet earth. Then we are "knowing" Him experientially.

Now, we all, for the most part, know and love the first phrase of verse 10 of Philippians, chapter 3. The trouble is, Paul is not finished, there is the next little word "and." Look at that verse again and notice,

that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection . . .

Remember, we are still under the context of that controlling verb “ginosko,” or “to know by means of experience”. Paul is not saying, “I want to intellectually know all the theological facts about the doctrine of the resurrection. I want to make sure I pass the test.”

You should know the facts about the resurrection. Paul, for one, would score an “A+” on the test, as he knows all the facts. In fact, he has seen the resurrected Christ; he was given a tour of heaven.

Why then is Paul wanting to know the power of the resurrection?

What does it mean to know by means of experience in your personal walk as a believer the power of His resurrection? And how do you know if you are really experiencing in your own life the power of His resurrection? How do you know?

I am not going to tell you, but I will tell you where you can find the answer. Look at Ephesians, chapter 2, and Colossians, chapter 2.

I will give you a hint and you study it. Colossians, chapter 3, verses 1 and 2, say,

. . . if [third class condition] you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.

So truly knowing experientially the resurrection of Christ means that you live your life in the opposite manner of a materialist. Your affections are on the life to come, not this life.

Knowing personally the experience of the power of His resurrection means you are walking to the beat of a different drummer. So, do you know the power of His resurrection?

Now, look back at Philippians, chapter 3, verse 10, in the latter part of the verse, as Paul goes on to say,

that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings . . .

Paul wants to know by means of experience the sufferings of Christ!

If you took contemporary Christianity and compared it to this verse, 100% would sign up and agree to the first phrase,

that I may know Him [Christ] . . .

I like that! The numbers dramatically drop on the next phrase,

. . . and the power of His resurrection . . .

The question might be, “You mean, instead of focusing on my kingdom, I’m supposed to focus on His? How would that affect my financial portfolio?”

Dramatically!

Then, you get to the last phrase of the verse,

. . . and the fellowship of His sufferings . . .

How many would ever sign up for a personal experience in suffering the sufferings of Christ?

Paul, however, wanted it all. In fact, Paul was so desirous to know Christ; to be influenced by Christ; to be intimate with Christ that he wanted to celebrate the power of the resurrection of Christ by living for heaven instead of earth. He also wanted to suffer through the valley of the shadow of death where Christ walked.

Paul said, “Lord, I want to be like You so much that I’m willing to voluntarily sign up for a course called *Personal Suffering 101*.”

I now invite your attention to where it finally begins to come true – in Acts, chapter 21.

Now, remember that Paul has just left for Jerusalem, in spite of all his friends and companions begging him not to. In our last study we talked about following the will of God, even though no one else agrees with you. So, with a heavy heart, or as Paul said, “a broken heart,” he leaves for his beloved Jerusalem.

A Sweet Reunion

We will begin with verses 15 through 17 of Acts, chapter 21, where Paul has a sweet reunion.

After these days we got ready and started on our way up to Jerusalem. Some of the disciples from Caesarea also came with us, taking us to Mnason of Cyprus, a disciple of long standing with whom we were to lodge. After we arrived in Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly.

Frankly, this is the only bright spot in the whole story of Paul’s visit to Jerusalem. The heart of Paul has hungered for a return home. This is his beloved city – the city of the apostles – and he is filled up to the brim with the story of God’s grace that has been revealed during his missionary journeys.

Verse 17b says it all,

. . . the brethren received us gladly.

What a reunion that must have been with family and friends.

Introducing the mission team

Continue to verses 18 and 19 for the introduction of the mission team.

And the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. After he had greeted them, he began to relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.

Evidently this is an official meeting. Luke writes that Paul went in with his entire missionary team before James, the leading elder/teacher. James, by the way, had already become rather well known for his best seller – a letter that we call, the book of James – which had been circulating for about ten years by now. And, all the elders were present. Some believe that the church in Jerusalem which numbered in the thousands, had translated the Sanhedrin’s structure into church polity by electing seventy elders.

No doubt the size of Jerusalem’s church required an expanded leadership, as is true in any New Testament church. Our church is on the verge of perhaps tripling our existing elder body in order to keep pace with the myriad of decisions that must be made. I was noticing this past week in our church directory that more than 1200 families and single adults consider this church to be their church home. We have an incredible responsibility before God.

You can only imagine the scene as Paul introduced his fellow missionaries to James and the elders. Then, perhaps James introduced the elders to the missionaries.

Recounting the miracle timeline

Following these greetings, verse 19 tell us that Paul began detailing for them, the events of his three missionary journeys.

After he had greeted them, he began to relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.

Although Paul did not have a slide presentation, I imagine the men must have sat on the edge of their seats as Paul recounted stories of his missionary adventures. There were narrow escapes from death, a midnight rescue from jail by an earthquake, the first convert in all of Europe, thousands of Gentiles saved

by faith in the Redeemer, churches planted, miracles performed, magicians silenced . . . and on and on.

Wow! This was an incredible report of God’s power and the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

A Short-lived Celebration

A celebration began in verse 20a, although it was short-lived.

And when they heard it they began glorifying God; . . .

As you can imagine, they began glorifying God. I only wish there was an exclamation point there, instead of the little word “and,” which follows. There was so much to celebrate, but the celebration hardly had a chance to get off the ground!

The Jews were still prejudiced and prideful

Read the last part of verse 20.

. . . and they said to him, “You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Law;

“Excuse me . . . what we were just talking about – weren’t we talking about the thousands of Gentiles that believed in Europe? Weren’t we about to throw a celebration?”

Jewish prejudice and pride was still alive. “So what about thousands of Gentiles coming to Christ, let us tell you about thousands of Jews who not only believe in Christ, but are zealous for the holy Law. Now that’s something to get excited about.”

You can almost hear the air going out of Paul’s balloon.

The rumors were still present and poisoning

However, that is not all – continue to verse 21.

. . . and they [the thousands of Jewish converts] have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs.

This simply was not true. Paul had been misinterpreted and misunderstood. He had not told the Jews to stop their customs. He simply declared that the rituals of Judaism were not necessary for salvation. In fact, Paul had earlier, as we were told in chapter 16, verse 3 of Acts, taken Timothy, a half Jew, to be circumcised, so that the Jewish believers

would not be offended. Paul was not against the Law; he was simply for grace.

Did you notice the inflammatory nature of the rumor? Look at verse 21 again.

. . . you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses . . .

This was simply not true! But even though this rumor did not have a leg to stand on, like all rumors, it still ran incredibly fast. Thousands of Jews in the Jerusalem church and surrounding regions had been poisoned against Paul.

Isn't that the enemy's design for rumors and exaggerations? Proverbs, chapter 16, verse 28 says,

. . . a slanderer separates intimate friends.

In Chuck Swindoll's commentary on this incident in Paul's life, he wrote this perceptive analogy:

The local church is one of Satan's favorite seedbeds for growing a weedy crop of misunderstandings. He tills our thoughts like soil, mixing in a shovel full of good intentions, a bag full of prejudice, and a few pellets of pride. Then he scatters an accusing word here, and inflammatory comment there, and waits for them to germinate.

One of the characteristics of rumors and gossip is seen here in this passage; the person being talked about is never invited to the discussion.ⁱ

Paul was miles away and, without him even knowing it, his character and mission were being run into the ground by gossip.

Now he returns, and the leaders say in unison, in verse 22,

What, then, is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come.

"What then is to be done?!"

I can tell you what cannot be done for Paul. His character cannot be completely exonerated. His motives have been questioned; his leadership of the European missionary movement has been clouded with suspicion that he has led people astray. The things that have been said, suggested, or implied cannot be taken back.

Kent Hughes told the legendary story of the peasant woman who repeated a bit of gossip about a neighbor and within a short time, the whole town knew the story. The slandered person was deeply hurt and unhappy. But then, the lady responsible for spreading the rumor learned that it was completely

untrue, so she went to a wise old sage to find out what she could do to repair the damage.

After listening to her problem, the wise man said, "Go to the marketplace, purchase a fowl, and have it killed. Then on your way home, pluck its feathers one by one and drop them in front of each home in the village!"

Though surprised by this unusual advice, the woman did as she was told. The next day she informed the man that she had done as instructed. "Now," he said, "go and collect all those feathers and bring them back to me."

The woman retraced her footsteps, but to her dismay, the wind had blown all the feathers away. After searching all day long, she returned with only two or three in her hand. "You see," said the old wise man, "it is easy to drop your words, but impossible to bring them all back."ⁱⁱ

Unfounded or not, these rumors about Paul were spreading. They were spreading so much that – as we are given the implication of the last part of verse 22.

. . . They will certainly hear that you have come.

In other words, "What are we supposed to do Paul? These Jews will certainly hear that you have arrived, and that means trouble!"

They were saying, "Listen, we like you, Paul, but we really wish you'd go on another missionary journey, and make it a long one, Paul."

They viewed Paul sort of like you might have viewed little Pig Pen in every Charlie Brown cartoon in which he ever made an appearance. Everywhere he went, he gathered dust and dirt. They viewed Paul like that. "Paul, you just seem to stir up trouble wherever you go. The last time you left, we had a near split in the church over this Gentile/Jew issue. Now you're back again, and that means more trouble than ever before."

"What are we going to do, Paul?"

This is the point at which I would expect to hear a sermon from Paul. "What do you mean, what is to be done?! Here is a wonderful opportunity for all of us to take a giant step forward in the right direction by clearly delineating what we do believe about law and grace. Furthermore, you men should know that these rumors are unfounded! What do you mean, 'they have been told I am teaching others to forsake Moses'? Who told them? Where's the evidence? Why wasn't I contacted? And furthermore, I can't believe you allowed these rumors to be propagated

and my character maligned and my mission in Europe to be misinterpreted! How could you allow this to go on?"

Guess what? There was no lecture; no self-defense; no "pity party"; nothing! Why not? Because Paul wanted to experience the fellowship of Christ's sufferings. And, when Christ was misunderstood, misinterpreted and maligned, He refused to defend Himself.

that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings . . .

A suffering servant model

Paul provides a model for suffering misunderstanding. He:

- did not retaliate;
- did not allow his emotions to blur his judgment;
- did not have a vindictive attitude, but a loving one;
- did not run from his accusers, but faced them directly;
- had (most importantly) a settled confidence that God was in control.ⁱⁱⁱ

The elders submit the plan

Notice verses 23 through 24.

Therefore do this that we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; take them and purify yourself along with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads; and all will know that there is nothing to the things which they have been told about you, but that you yourself also walk orderly, keeping the Law.

The elders say, "Here's the plan. Four men from the church are fulfilling a Nazarite vow (a vow to abstain from meat and wine and to not cut their hair for thirty days). So, Paul, you pick up the expenses for these men. Pay for three animal offerings for each man, plus cereal and drink offerings. And also, Paul, go through a seven day ritual of purification."

Now, none of this violated the truth of the gospel. During this period of transition, God patiently waited some forty years for the church to be divested of its Jewish customs. Paul's point was that none of these rituals were necessary for purification, but they could

certainly be used as outward symbols of dedication to God.

So, the elders said, "Paul, you sponsor them, and this will show all the Jews that you really aren't against Moses after all."

The apostle submits to the plan

So, Paul submits to the plan of the elders. Look at verses 25 through 26.

"But concerning the Gentiles who have believed, we wrote, having decided that they should abstain from meat sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication." Then Paul took the men, and the next day, purifying himself along with them, went into the temple, giving notice of the completion of the days of purification, until the sacrifice was offered for each one of them.

The Jews misinterpret the plan

The Jews, however, misinterpret the plan. Continue to verses 27 through 36.

When the seven days were almost over, the Jews from Asia, upon seeing him in the temple, began to stir up all the crowd and laid hands on him,

crying out, "Men of Israel, come to our aid! This is the man who preaches to all men everywhere against our people and the Law, and this place; and besides he has even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place."

For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with him, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple.

Then all the city was provoked, and the people rushed together, and taking hold of Paul they dragged him out of the temple, and immediately the doors were shut.

While they were seeking to kill him, a report came up to the commander of the Roman cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion.

At once he took along some soldiers and centurions and ran down to them; and when they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.

Then the commander came up and took hold of him, and ordered him to be bound with two chains; and he began asking who he was and what he had done.

But among the crowd some were shouting one thing and some another, and when he could not find out the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks.

When he got to the stairs, he was carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the mob;

for the multitude of the people kept following them, shouting, "Away with him!"

Those words, "Away with him!" are the same Greek words used some thirty years earlier by most of this same crowd as Jesus Christ stood trial – "Away with Him! Away with Him! . . ."

Paul was indeed experiencing the sufferings of Christ. How could this beaten, broken apostle do anything other than quit? "That's it! I've had enough!"

Can you imagine being Paul? Your heart was already broken as you pursued God's will in coming to Jerusalem. Then you arrived to discover a conspiracy against you within the church. You have been misunderstood, maligned, and misinterpreted.

"Paul, why not quit?"

Because Paul had a passion for people, a love for his nation, a desire to speak the gospel, even if it meant he was misunderstood, misinterpreted, hurt, or even killed. Ultimately, ladies and gentlemen, it was his passion and surrender to know Christ, the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings that kept Paul from quitting.

When Lou Little was the football coach at Georgetown University, a most remarkable event occurred. On his team was a player of average ability who rarely got to play in the game. Coach Little was fond of him, and especially the fact that he had seen

this young man walking across campus arm in arm with his father on several occasions.

One day, shortly before a huge game against a rival university, this young man's mother called him with the news that his father had died that morning of a heart attack. The student went home for the funeral and three days later, was back and in Coach Little's office pleading, "Coach, will you start me in the game tonight? I think that is what my father would have liked most."

After a moment's hesitation, Little said, "Okay, but only for a couple of plays, then you're back out."

True to his word, he put the young man in – but never took him back out. For sixty minutes, this athlete ran, blocked, and tackled like an All-American. After the game, the coach said, "Son, you have never played like that before. What got into you?"

"Well, you remember seeing how my father and I walked arm-in-arm? You see, he was totally blind, and tonight was the first time he ever saw me play."

Now, I do not want to spark a debate on what people do in heaven and whether or not they even care to watch a game on earth. What did happen was an ordinary player believed his father was watching him play for the first time and that impassioned him like never before.

However, I can tell you this truth. The way you respond in the game of life – to those tough knock downs of misunderstanding; to the relentless blows of gossiping rumors; to those blind sided hits when someone misinterpreted your best of intentions – the way you stay in that game has everything to do with who you are playing your life out for; who you are trying to please.

Paul was willing to take every hit and even, if necessary, die for the sake of the audience he played to. You see, Paul played to the audience of One – his audience was Jesus Christ, and Christ alone!

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 8/9/1998 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Chuck Swindoll, "The Strength of an Exacting Passion," Insight for Living, p. 79.

ⁱⁱ Kent Hughes, Acts (Crossway Books), p. 293.

ⁱⁱⁱ Chuck Swindoll, "Acts," Insight for Living, p. 80.