

The Fellowship of His Sufferings



David Wilkerson July 1, 1983

"That I might know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings; being made conformable to his death" (Philippians 3:10).

Fellowship is the union of friends sharing similar interests or problems. To suffer is to feel pain or distress.

Paul yearned to share the pain and distress that Christ experienced. Did he not have enough suffering in his own life? Did he not have the hurts and cares of all the churches heavy upon his heart? Yet still he prays — "Oh, that I might know how to share Christ's pain and hurt."

Soon after Paul's conversion, Ananias delivered a word from the Lord to him "concerning the great things he must suffer for the sake of Christ's name" (Acts 9:16). It was to be more than the personal distress of shame, rejection, persecution, and hardships. He would suffer through shipwreck, stonings, beatings, and afflictions of body and soul. He would joyfully suffer the loss of all things. In triumph over all these personal sufferings he would proclaim,

"I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us." (Romans 8:18).

Paul suffered as few other men have suffered. Yet still he considered it all nothing in comparison to the sufferings of Jesus Christ, his Lord. Peter, too, spoke of being both a witness to and a partaker of Christ's suffering:

"I...who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ..." (I Peter 5:1).

"Rejoice...inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings..." (I Peter 4:13).
Who, in This Day and Age Yearns to Share in the Sufferings of Jesus Christ?

The church now focuses inwardly, spending most of its spiritual energy on the pain, distress and hurts of its members. In nearly all communities, there are numerous intimate prayer groups reaching out with compassion to share in the hurts of suffering neighbors. We have entered into the fellowship of our brothers' suffering.

That is all commendable. It is true that when one member of the body suffers, we all suffer. I see nothing wrong with Christians getting together to share their hurts and to lift one another's burdens. That is absolutely scriptural.

The problem is — we are becoming selfishly consumed by our own hurts, and the hurts of other suffering brothers and sisters. It has left us with little or no time to think of Christ's sufferings — let alone share in them.

I'm a bit ashamed as I look back over the past 25 years of my preaching. I preached so many sermons about human suffering, and so little about Christ's sufferings. I wept over the hurts of multitudes, and never shed a tear over Christ's pain and distress. I knew the pain and sorrow of people from all walks of life, but I knew nothing of His sufferings.

Look about us and see if this is not the problem with nearly all Christendom today. Go to any bookstore and count

the number of books dealing with human hurts — such as depression, fear, rejection, divorce, remarriage, loneliness, etc. Attend nearly any seminar or crusade, and you will hear much insight on how to cope with personal pain and distress. Yet how little is written or taught about sharing the sufferings of Jesus Christ, the Lord.

I am not putting it all down. We need all the help we can get. But, we desperately need to pray with Paul that we may understand and share in Christ's sufferings. God help us get our eyes off ourselves and our own hurts, and focus on fellowshiping in His sufferings.

The Sufferings of Christ Are Not to Be Found in His Human Body — They Are Spiritual!

We get sentimental about Christ's human pain at Calvary. We are deeply moved by the hurt He suffered from the crown of thorns, the driven nails, the piercing spear, the leering crowds, the mocking soldiers.

But you can never enter into His sufferings if that is as deep as you go. It is so much deeper than that! Paul also knew what it was to be beaten, mocked, and scourged. Paul bled. He too was despised and rejected by men. If you use a human scale, this apostle could have nearly balanced the Savior's physical pain and suffering.

Nor was it cosmic suffering Paul desired to share with Christ. No one can share in Christ's divine, universal suffering. He alone took upon Himself the sins of the whole world. He alone was wounded for our transgressions. The agony of His redemptive act was uniquely His.

The sufferings of Christ that Paul and we can fellowship in have to do with the spiritual sufferings He endured while in human form. He suffered far more in His spirit, before the Cross. It had to do with a backslidden church, unbelieving loved ones, and what it cost Him to move from the earth back to the heavenlies.

I am sure no man can fully understand all His sufferings, and certainly my vision is very limited. But I have been led by the Spirit to fellowship in three special aspects of His sufferings. Most of it can be found in the book of John.
I. Christ Suffered Grievously at the Sight of His House Being Turned Into a Den of Thieves.

Jesus went up to Jerusalem at Passover and entered the temple. What He saw appalled Him. Merchandisers had taken over the house of God! He came seeking a house of prayer; what he found was a total preoccupation with the promotion, display, and sales of religious merchandise. The religious leaders were counting their profits. God's people were not reading or studying or hearing the Word — they were too busy selling religious articles. What busy-ness! How these religious promoters ran about, thinking they were doing the work of God. Men of God had become hucksters of religious merchandise.

Tables had been set up everywhere in God's house, to promote and sell sheep, oxen, doves, candies, incense, and various other merchandise for religious purposes. The cash register made the loudest noise in the house. Money was being made on God and religion.

Talk of suffering? What terrible pain did our Lord suffer at such a sight to cause His compassionate heart to boil with holy anger. His meek spirit raged with righteous indignation.

Can you picture that moment? With whip in hand, our Lord stormed into the temple and began flailing in all directions, overturning the tables piled high with merchandise. He scattered the promoters, the pitch men, the hucksters.

"Out," He thundered, "out of my Father's house! You have desecrated this holy place, turning this house of prayer into a commercial enterprise!"

Not anywhere else in all the Scriptures will you find such outrage in the Master! It was one of the most painful, suffering experiences in all His ministry. He could not stand by and permit His Father's house to become a den for religious thieves.

Are we willing today to fellowship with Christ in this aspect of His sufferings? Do we share His hurt at seeing God's house once again being turned over to merchandisers? Will we be outraged by the horrible commercialism of the gospel? Will we feel His rage against spiritual hucksterism enough to withdraw from all such activities? Do we feel His hurt enough to renounce all ministries that grind out merchandise just for the sake of making money?

Can we share His suffering at this point enough to stand against those who would turn God's house into a theater

or entertainment center for promoters? Can we grieve over all the profiteering on the name of Jesus? Can we get our eyes off the cash and back on the Cross?

Peter warns of the coming of false prophets who will steal in among us, and because of covetousness, "they will with phony words make merchandise of you..." (II Peter 2:3). In other words, these men will come with sales pitches — seeing nothing but dollar signs. They will put the name of Jesus on anything to get your money to enrich themselves. These merchants need to quit preaching, and go into business.

How the heavens must rage against all the buying and selling of modern Jesus merchandise. How it must hurt our Lord to see evangelists more concerned about record, tape, and book sales, than reaching lost humanity. What small fortunes are being made through the promotion and sale of religious merchandise in church circles. We have done far more than commercialize Christmas — we have commercialized the very Godhead!

God gives us a message, a talent, a gift — and we package and sell it! We freely receive; we expensively sell. We are afraid to trust God to support our ministries, so we develop a side business out of what God freely gave us. We incorporate our talents to turn a profit. Are there no evangelists or ministries left in the world with nothing to promote but Jesus Christ?

The issue goes beyond selling religious merchandise in God's house. It includes all secular promotion of the things of God. The average Christian would be shocked if he knew how many popular ministries are promoted by secular agencies who "sell" the man and his message. They package and sell the gospel like soap and cereal. The result is cutesy little songs and sermons with much hype and little life.

Just this week I received a formal notice that a certain ministry had hired a Madison Avenue public relations man to promote them. They felt they needed more exposure and a better public image in order to meet their budget. The prophets of God are being replaced by PR men!

I want nothing to do with the professional hucksters and promoters. They have no right to touch the anointed things of God. They compromise men of God, they rob them of their anointing, and substitute a slick, lifeless professionalism. They take powerful men of God and turn them into proud celebrities who build reputations on the gospel. They take spiritual, humble singing groups, dress them in sequined jackets, rewrite the songs so no one will be offended, and try to be so professional they can make the secular charts. I see singing groups everywhere being seduced, losing God's anointing, and ending up just another lifeless group.

Not only will God not bless this modern trend toward secular professionalism, He will thunder against it and drive it out of His presence! Heaven didn't put up with it in the temple at Jerusalem, and it will not put up with it in these last days. The days of the merchandisers in God's house are numbered.

II. Christ Suffers When Those He Loves Most Doubt His Interest and His Power!

Jesus loved Lazarus. He also dearly loved his two sisters, Mary and Martha. Their home was an oasis for the Master. We know Lazarus and his family loved Jesus, but the Scripture is most emphatic in pointing out Christ's love for them:

"He whom Christ loved was sick..." (John 11:3).

When Jesus heard that, He sent them a message:

"This sickness is not unto death; but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby..." (John 11:4).

Jesus knew that His Father intended that this miracle among His most beloved friends should give Him glory and hopefully, give them confidence and faith! But what an experience of deep suffering it turned out to be for Jesus. The disciples doubted Him. Mary and Martha doubted Him. So did the weeping friends of Lazarus.

Did Mary know how deeply she hurt Him when she accused Him of being preoccupied and disinterested in their problem?

"...Lord, if you had just taken the effort to be here on time — it's too late now...the damage is done."

Did Martha know how it hurt her Master when she questioned His resurrection power? He had plainly told her, "Thy brother shall rise again." But His word was not enough: "Oh, yes, on resurrection day he will arise — but what about now?"

How painful it must have been for Christ to have His dearest friends doubt He had all the power they needed. "Don't you know who I am yet?" is what the Lord was seeming to say.

"I am the resurrection, and the life...believe in me. I have the power, the life..."

I don't think we know how deep the pain was for Him at that moment. His own disciples couldn't grasp the concept of who He was. It was awful enough that His own nation of people knew Him not, but those He loved dearly — how could they not recognize His power? Could He have said to Himself, "Not even my dearest friends believe — who then will ever believe?"

It is the ignoring of His power that causes such pain and distress to our Lord! If we, His dearest friends, will not trust His power and faithfulness — who ever will? We call Him friend, Lord — but we do not live our lives as though He had the power needed to keep us victorious and joyful.

In recent weeks the Holy Spirit has been asking me repeatedly, "Is He really Lord? Is He truly Lord to you?" I testify to others that He is Lord! I tell myself that He is! But there are times I must cause Him so much hurt because I doubt Him in the times of need and crisis.

If He is Lord, why do we live in such fear? Why do sickness and death so frighten us? Why do we live so down, so empty, so dry — when our Creator Lord has all power, all might, all wisdom! No wonder Jesus wept!

Let me tell you what truly satisfies the heart of our Lord. It is the child of His who completely rests in His love, His power, and His wisdom. It is the child who can say, "I know He has all power, He can heal and save by whatever means He chooses — but He also is all wisdom, and I will trust completely even when I don't understand His workings."

The church is full of people who believe in His power. That is all they know; it is all they want. Oh, how they trust when they see miracles and blessings. But let God in His wisdom take a loved one home to Himself, and those same power brokers either pout, or they go into a tailspin of fear and unbelief. They end up accusing God of unfairness or unconcern.

I believe in miracles! I believe in healing! He can heal cancer or any other disease. I believe my great God has a mighty arm that has authority over all the universe, all of nature, and all kingdoms of darkness. But I don't trust Him at all if I cannot believe He will do what is right — through good times and bad, through sickness and health, through life or death. I refuse to push God — I prefer to rest in His power, mercy, and wisdom.

I fellowship in Christ's suffering when I grieve over Christians who believe God can get glory only in miracles, signs and wonders. Jesus Himself said, "This sickness of [Lazarus]...is for the glory of God..." Not just the resurrection from the dead, but the sickness also. Some Christians cringe at the thought that God can get glory out of any illness. But I'll go a step further and say that God can even get glory out of the death of His saints, as He did with the suffering and death of His own Son. I repeat my concept that death in Christ is the ultimate healing.

It is not doubt to rest in the wisdom of God to overrule our prayers, even our faith. Job could say, after seeing no relief — "Though he slay me, yet will I trust Him" (Job 13:15).

What Mary and Martha should have done was to rest in Christ's love and power — telling Him, "Lord, we know you are well able to raise him up. But, if not, you must have supernatural reasons, backed by holy wisdom — so we accept joyfully your ways."

I know a dying family in Ohio who is bringing more glory to God than most healthy Christians in that state. The singing Sigrist family suffers a rare form of cancer. Two daughters have gone to be with Christ — another is stricken. The father has a large tumor in his stomach. They live on the brink of death. But, oh, the victory in that household! They rejoice in God's love and faithfulness. Newspapers have carried the story of their faith throughout the state. They have such great faith in Christ's healing power — but also a complete confidence in His wisdom and love. They rest in God, preferring His will to their own.

People who hear their story say, "That's the kind of faith I want! That's the kind of God I want to serve. One who can give such peace and rest in the very face of death itself. A God who keeps you from coming apart in a crisis."

"Blessed are they who have not seen, yet believe..." (John 20:29).

I believe God can get glory out of any and all situations. He doesn't need a miracle to get Him glory. He can cause even the wrath of men to praise Him. The sweetest grace of all is that which Christ gives to those who are led through the valley and shadow of death. They are the ones who know the glory of His comfort and the beauty of His rest. They look death in the eye and feel no alarm. Even pain and sickness can bring forth the most glorious revelation of the actual presence of Jesus. He makes our bed, in sickness (Ps. 41:3). Our family can vouch for that also. Through Job — like trials, Christ revealed Himself in ways beyond the glory of miracles. We discussed supernatural comfort, grace and rest.

III. Christ Suffered When He Gave Up That Which on Earth Was Most Precious to Him!

Could Jesus love Lazarus, Mary and Martha, and not love His own mother dearly? Did He love His disciples more than his mother? I can't believe that.

In His earthly form, He was "The son of Mary." That one line in itself tells us something of God's loving attitude toward this blessed woman. He was the fruit of her womb. She cuddled Him as a baby. She taught Him. She was like any other loving, caring mother who has a close relationship with her child. How she worried when He was lost in Jerusalem. How she grieved when neighbors and friends spoke against her dear son. She must have wept often to hear the slander, the lies, the accusations. And who can know her pain at the foot of the Cross. She knew He was God in the flesh — but He was also her dearly beloved son.

If Christ was tempted at all points as we are, then certainly He suffered deeply when He gave up His earthly relationship to His beloved mother. What a touching human scene in John 19:

"Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister...and Mary Magdalene...
When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son!
Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! and from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home..." (John 19:25–27).

In His very last hour, He is thinking of his mother. Evidently Joseph, His father, was dead — and Jesus wanted to leave her in the loving care of one He trusted. John, that very day, took Mary into his own home, to be her provider and protector.

It's so easy to skip over those seven little words and miss their significance: "Woman, behold thy son...behold thy mother." Jesus was at that moment giving her up! He would now be more than the son of Mary, but her Lord and Savior. He was going back to His heavenly Father with great joy and expectancy, but He had known the glory of human love — of a son for his mother.

How hard it must have been, humanly speaking, to say in essence — "Woman, I am no longer yours. John is now your son. I must give you up and give you to another. Another must take my place in your daily life."

It is not that Christ wanted to remain in human form. His work on earth was over. Redemption was about to be completed. But He shared the suffering of giving up something most precious in His life.

We too share in the pain and distress of giving up that which is most precious to us. Right now, somewhere, godly saints are having to give up to death their most precious loved ones. What sweet suffering to say goodbye! What lingering pain when a loved one passes from the earthly to the eternal. Christ felt that pain, and you can be sure that when you are called upon to make that sacrifice, He will give you all the grace you need to handle it.

I'm so glad He suffered with us in such a personal, intimate way. I may not relate to the pain of the driven nails and the crushing blow of the spear — but I can relate to the pain He felt when He gave His mother over to another. We must all one day go through that particular pain. What a sweet, loving Savior who felt our hurt at this very point.

The Way of the Cross Is Surrender of All That Is Dear to Us in This Life!

My wife and I felt the lonely pain of giving up all four of our children to the streets — as evangelists to the lost. How we hurt the day the last one left. There was such an empty feeling. The house was deathly still. We cried at night. But thank God we gave them up to God's work. We have now known the fellowship of Christ's suffering. And His joy and comfort now flood us every waking hour.

I have an associate who had to give up a pastoral ministry because of a brain tumor. That work was dear to him. Yet in that surrender he has grown by leaps and bounds — to spiritual heights he could never have reached had he not known the fellowship of Christ's sufferings.

It must come finally to this — whatever suffering it takes, we must give up everything that would keep us from doing the perfect will of God!

- That means coming to the place where Christ alone is sufficient...where He is everything, even more than life itself.
- It means loving Christ above all other human love. More than family! More than husband, wife, children, brother or sister.
- To love them all, yet inwardly give them up to Him as a sacrifice to your great love for the Lord Jesus Christ.
- Do that, and you will break through to the glory of His resurrection power and will conform to his death.

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