
Be Still.

THOUGHTS AND READINGS FOR MEDITATION 52



Sitting at the Feet of a Suffering Saint

“How many are not saved because we don’t accept the cross?”

JOSEPH TSON

“Therefore I endure all things for the elect’s sakes, that they may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.”

2 Tim. 2:10

I have never been the same since sitting at the feet of Richard Wurmbrand. It was literally at his feet. He took off his shoes and sat in a chair on the slightly raised platform at Grace Baptist Church in south Minneapolis. (I learned later it had to do with damage to his feet during the torture that he had received in a Romanian prison.) Before him—and below him—sat about a dozen pastors. He spoke of suffering. Again and again he said that Jesus “chose” suffering. He “chose” it. It did not merely happen to him. He “chose” it. “No one takes my life from me. I lay it down of my own will” (John 10:18). He asked us if *we* would choose suffering for the sake of Christ.

Richard Wurmbrand was an evangelical Lutheran pastor of Jewish origin who was born in 1909 in Romania. When the Communists seized his native land in 1945, he became a leader in the underground church. In 1948 he and his wife, Sabina, were arrested. He served fourteen years in Red Prisons, including three years in solitary confinement in a subterranean cell, never seeing the sun, the stars, or flowers. He saw no one except his guards and torturers. Christian friends in Norway purchased his freedom for \$10,000 in 1964.

How Beautiful Is Sacrifice?

One of the stories he told is about a Cistercian abbot who was interviewed on Italian TV. The interviewer was especially interested in the Cistercian tradition of living in silence and solitude. So he asked the abbot, “And what if you were to realize at the end of your life that atheism is true, that there is no God? Tell me, what if it were true?” The Abbot replied, “Holiness, silence, and sacrifice are beautiful in themselves, even without promise of reward. I still will have used my life well.”

Few glimpses into the meaning of life have had a greater impact on my contemplations about suffering. The first impact of the abbot’s response was a superficial, romantic surge of glory. But then something stuck. It did not sit well. Something was wrong. At first I could not figure it out, so I turned to the great Christian sufferer, the apostle Paul, and was stunned by the gulf between him and the abbot. The abbot had replied, “It was a good and noble life anyway.” Paul gave his answer in 1 Corinthians 15:19, “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied.” This is the exact opposite of the abbot’s answer.

Why did Paul not agree with the monk? Why didn’t Paul say, “Even if Christ is not raised from the dead, and even if there is no God, a life of love and labour and sacrifice and suffering is a good life.” Why didn’t he say, “Even without the reward of resurrection we are not to be pitied”? Why did he say instead, “If our hope in Christ proves false in the end, we are to be pitied more than anyone.”

Does Life Go Better With Christ?

This is an utterly crucial question for the Christian Church, especially in the prosperous West. How many times do we hear Christian testimonies to the effect that becoming a Christian has made life easier? We describe the benefits of Christianity in terms

that would make it a good life, even if there were no God and no resurrection. Think of all the Biblical psychological and relational benefits: the fruit of the Holy Spirit, love, joy and peace. Is it not a good life to live, even if it turns out to be based on a falsehood? What's wrong with Paul then? Was he not living the abundant life? It does not seem to be pitiable to live your three score and ten in a joyful and satisfying delusion, if that delusion makes no difference whatever for the future. If delusion can turn meaninglessness into happiness, why not be deluded? Paul's was a life of freely chosen suffering beyond anything we ordinarily experience. Paul's belief in God, and his confidence in resurrection, and his hope in eternal fellowship with Christ did not produce a life of comfort and ease that would have been satisfying even without resurrection. No, what his hope produced was a life of chosen suffering. Yes, he knew joy unspeakable. But it was a "rejoicing in hope" (Romans 12:12). And that hope freed him to embrace sufferings that he never would have chosen apart from the hope of his own resurrection and the resurrection of those for whom he suffered. He answers Richard Wurmbbrand's question, Yes. He chooses suffering.

Is There a Difference Between Conflict and Cancer?

Someone may ask at this point, "What about suffering I do not choose? Like cancer. Or the death of my child in a car accident? Or a severe depression?" Most suffering Christians accept it as part of a choice to be openly Christian in risky situations. But even sickness may result from living as a Christian even when there is no intentional hostility from unbelievers. For example, a Christian may go to a disease-ridden village to minister, and contract the disease.

But then, when you stop to think about it, all of life, if it is lived earnestly by faith in the pursuit of God's glory and the salvation of others, is like the Christian who goes to the disease-ridden village. The suffering that comes is part of the price of living where you are in obedience to the call of God. In choosing to follow Christ in the way he directs, we choose all that this path includes under his sovereign providence. Thus all suffering that comes in the path of obedience is suffering with Christ and for Christ—whether it is cancer or conflict.

When a missionary's child gets diarrhoea, we think of this as part of the price of faithfulness. But if any parent is walking in the path of obedience to God's calling, it is the same price.

All Suffering in a Christian Calling is *with* Christ and *for* Christ

All experiences of suffering in the path of Christian obedience, whether from persecution or sickness or accident, have this in common: they all threaten our faith in the

goodness of God and tempt us to leave the path of obedience. Therefore, every triumph of faith and all perseverance in obedience are testimonies to the goodness of God and the preciousness of Christ—whether the enemy is sickness, Satan, sin or sabotage. What turns sufferings into sufferings "with" and "for" Christ is not how intentional our enemies are, but *how faithful we are*. If we are Christ's, then what befalls us is for his glory and for our good whether it is caused by enzymes or by enemies.

Therefore all suffering, of every kind, that we endure in the path of our Christian calling is a suffering "*with* Christ" and "*for* Christ." *With him* in the sense that the suffering comes to us as we are walking with him by faith, and in the sense that it is endured in the strength that he supplies through his sympathising high-priestly ministry (Hebrews 4:15). *For him* in the sense that the suffering tests and proves our allegiance to his goodness and power, and in the sense that it reveals his worth as an all-sufficient compensation and prize.

Satan's And God's Designs in Suffering

Not only that, the suffering of sickness and the suffering of persecution have this in common: they are both intended by Satan for the destruction of our faith, and governed by God for the purifying of our faith. God rules over Satan and gives him no more leash than can accomplish his ultimate purposes. Those purposes are the opposite of Satan's, even in the very same experience of suffering. For example, the writer of the book of Hebrews shows his readers how not to lose heart in persecution, because of God's fatherly design of purifying discipline. The same is true of sickness. Both the design of Satan and the design of God are evident in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. "There was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me—to keep me from exalting myself! . . . I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.' Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong."

Christ sovereignly accomplishes his loving, purifying purpose by overruling Satan's destructive attempts. Satan is always aiming to destroy our faith; but Christ magnifies his power in weakness.

Is Gluttony the Alternative to Resurrection?

Christianity, as Paul understands it, is not the best way to maximise pleasure, if this life is all that there is. Paul tells us the best way to maximise our pleasures in this life. "If the

dead are not raised, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (1 Corinthians 15:32). He does not mean something so naive as sheer epicureanism and debauchery. That is not the best way to maximise your pleasures, as anyone one knows who has followed the path of alcoholism and gluttony. Drunks and gluttons are to be pitied just like Christians, if there is no resurrection. He means that, without the hope of resurrection, one should pursue ordinary pleasures and avoid extraordinary suffering. This is the life Paul has rejected as a Christian. Thus, if the dead are not raised, and if there is no God and no heaven, he would not have pummelled his body the way he did. He would not have turned down wages for his tentmaking the way he did. He would not have walked into five whippings of 39 lashes. He would not have endured three beatings with rods. He would not have risked his life from robbers and deserts and rivers and cities and seas and angry mobs. He would not have accepted sleepless nights and cold and exposure. He would not have endured so long with backsliding and hypocritical Christians (2 Corinthians 11:23-29). Instead he would have simply lived the good life of comfort and ease as a respectable Jew with the prerogatives of Roman citizenship.

When Paul says, "If the dead are not raised, let us eat and drink," he does not mean, "Let's all become lechers." He means, there is a normal, simple, comfortable, ordinary life of human delights that we may enjoy with no troubling thoughts of heaven or hell or sin or holiness or God—IF there is no resurrection from the dead. And what stunned me about this train of thought is that many professing Christians seem to aim at just this, and call it Christianity.

Paul did not see his relation to Christ as the key to maximising his physical comforts and pleasures in this life. No, Paul's relation to Christ was a call to choose suffering—a suffering that was beyond what would make atheism "meaningful" or "beautiful" or "heroic." It was a suffering that would have been utterly foolish and pitiable to choose if there is no resurrection into the joyful presence of Christ.

An Indictment of Western Christianity

This was the astonishing thing I finally saw in pondering Wurmbbrand's story about the Cistercian abbot. In Paul's radically different viewpoint I saw an almost unbelievable indictment of Western Christianity. Am I overstating this? Judge for yourself. How many Christians do you know who could say, "The lifestyle I have chosen as a Christian would be utterly foolish and pitiable if there is no resurrection"? How many Christians are there who could say, "The suffering I have freely chosen to embrace for the cause of Christ would be a pitiable life if there is no resurrection"? As I see it, these are shocking questions.

Christianity: A Life of Chosen Suffering

The Christian life for Paul was a life of chosen sacrifice on earth that we might gain the joy of fellowship with Christ in the age to come. "Whatever things were gain to me, these things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss on account of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ . . . I share his sufferings . . . that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Phil. 3:7-11).

"If the dead are not raised . . . why am I in peril every hour? I protest, brothers, by my exultation in you which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, *I die every day!*" (1 Corinthians 15:29-31).

Why? Why Does He Do It?

This is not normal. Human beings flee suffering. We move to safer neighbourhoods. We choose milder climates. We buy air conditioners. We take aspirin. We come in out of the rain. We avoid dark streets. We purify our water. We do not normally choose a way of life that would put us in "peril every hour." Paul's life is out of sync with ordinary human choices. Virtually no advertising slogans lure us into daily dying.

So what is driving the apostle Paul to "share abundantly in Christ's sufferings" (2 Corinthians 1:5) and to be a "fool for Christ's sake" (1 Corinthians 4:10)? Why would he make choices that expose him to being "hungry and thirsty . . . poorly clothed . . . roughly treated . . . homeless . . . reviled . . . persecuted . . . slandered . . . as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things" (1 Corinthians 4:11-13)?

"I Will Show Him

How Much He Must Suffer."

Perhaps it was simple obedience to Christ's commission expressed in Acts 9:15-16. When Jesus sent Ananias to open Paul's eyes after he was blinded, he said, "Go, for [Paul] is a chosen instrument of mine, to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for my name's sake." Suffering was simply part of Paul's apostolic calling. To be faithful to his calling, he had to embrace what Christ gave him, much suffering. "Gave" is the right word. Because when writing to the Philippians Paul, incredibly, calls suffering a gift, just like faith is a gift. "To you it has been granted (*echaristhe* = freely given) for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake" (Philippians 1:29). But this would mean that the "gift" given to him as part of his apostleship is not viewed by Paul as limited to apostles. It is "granted" to the Philippian believers, the whole church.

Others have made the same strange discovery, that suffering is a gift to be embraced.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn spoke of his time in prison, with all its pain as a gift. "It was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually, it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes, not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts . . . Bless you, prison, for having been in my life." Solzhenitsyn agrees with the apostle Paul that suffering is—or can be—a gift not just for apostles, but for every Christian.

To Show He was Simply a Christian

Did Paul, then, embrace his suffering because it would confirm that he was simply a faithful disciple of Jesus? Jesus had said, "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it" (Luke 9:23-24). So there is no true Christianity without cross-bearing and a daily dying—which sounds very much like Paul's "*I die daily*" (1 Corinthians 15:31). Moreover, Jesus had told his disciples, "A slave is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20). So something would be amiss if Paul did not share in the sufferings of Jesus. Jesus gave his disciples an ominous image of their ministry: "Behold, I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves" (Luke 10:3). And so he promised them, "You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death . . . you will be hated by all nations on account of my name" (Luke 21:16; Matt 24:9). Evidently Paul did not consider these promises of suffering as limited to the original twelve apostles, because he passed them on to his churches. For example, he strengthened all his converts by telling them, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). And he encouraged the suffering Thessalonian believers by exhorting them not to be "disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this" (2 Thessalonians 3:3). And when he wrote to Timothy he made it a general principle: "Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12). And when he spoke of his sufferings he did not treat them as unique, but said to the churches, "Be imitators of me" (1 Corinthians 4:16). So it would be understandable if Paul embraced a life of suffering simply because it would confirm that he was a Christian. "If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you."

Weaning Christians Off the Breast of Self-Reliance

Since he believed that suffering was part of

faithful Christian living, he probed into why this might be so. His own experience of suffering drove him deep into the ways of God's love with his children. For example, he learned that God uses our suffering to wean us from self-reliance and cast us on himself alone. After suffering in Asia he says, "We do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead." This is God's universal purpose for all Christian suffering: more contentment in God and less satisfaction in self and the world.

I have never heard anyone say, "The really deep lessons of life have come through times of ease and comfort." But I have heard strong saints say, "Every significant advance I have ever made in grasping the depths of God's love and growing deep with him, has come through suffering." Samuel Rutherford said that when he was cast into the cellars of affliction, he remembered that the great King always kept his wine there. Charles Spurgeon said that those who dive in the sea of affliction bring up rare pearls.

To Magnify Christ as a Superior Satisfaction

The pearl of greatest price is the glory of Christ. Thus Paul stresses that in our sufferings the glory of Christ's all-sufficient grace is magnified. If we rely on him in our calamity, and he sustains our "rejoicing in hope," then he is shown to be the all-satisfying God of grace and strength that he is. If we hold fast to him "when all around our soul gives way," then we show that he is more to be desired than all we have lost. So suffering clearly is designed by God not only as a way to wean Christians off of self and onto grace, but also as a way to spotlight that grace and make it shine.

The deep things of life in God are discovered in suffering. So it was with Jesus himself. "Although he was a Son, Jesus learned obedience through what he suffered" (Hebrews 5:8). The same book where we read this also tells us Jesus never sinned (Hebrews 4:15). So "learning obedience" does not mean switching from disobedience to obedience. It means growing deeper and deeper with God in the experience of obedience. It means experiencing depths of yieldedness to God that would not have been otherwise demanded.

The Unspeakable Words of Christian Suffering

As Paul contemplated the path of his Master, he was moved to follow. But just at this point I have been astonished again by Paul's words. When he describes the relationship between Christ's sufferings and his own, he

speaks what seems unspeakable. He says to the Colossian church: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for you and I complete in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the church" (Colossians 1:24). This may be the most powerful motive for Paul's choosing a life of suffering. These words have filled me with longing for the Church of Jesus Christ. O that we would embrace the necessary suffering appointed for the advancement of Christ's kingdom in the world!

How Can We Complete The Sufferings Of Christ?

Is this not an unspeakable belittling of the all-sufficient, atoning worth of the death of Jesus? Did not Jesus himself say as he died, "It is finished" (John 19:30)? Paul's sufferings complete Christ's afflictions not by adding anything to their worth, but by extending them to the people they were meant to save. What is lacking in the afflictions of Christ is not that they are deficient in worth, as though they could not sufficiently cover the sins of all who believe. What is lacking is that the infinite value of Christ's afflictions is not known and trusted in the world. These afflictions and what they mean are still hidden to most peoples. And God's intention is that the mystery be revealed to all the nations. They must be carried by ministers of the word.

There is a strong confirmation of this interpretation in the use of similar words in Philippians 2:30. There was a man named Epaphroditus in the church at Philippi. When the church there gathered support for Paul (perhaps money or supplies or books), they decided to send them to Paul in Rome by the hand of Epaphroditus. In his travels with this supply, Epaphroditus almost lost his life. He was sick to the point of death, but God spared him (Philippians 2:27). So Paul tells the church in Philippi to honour Epaphroditus when he comes back (v. 29), and he explains his reason with words very similar to Colossians 1:24. He says, "Because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me." In the Greek original the phrase "complete what was lacking in your service to me" is almost identical with "complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions." This is the only place in the New Testament where those two words (complete, lacking) occur together. What does this mean? A hundred years ago a commentator Marvin Vincent explained it like this: "The gift to Paul was a gift of the church as a body. It was a sacrificial offering of love. What was lacking, and what would have been grateful to Paul and to the church alike, was the church's presentation of this offering in person. This was impossible, and Paul represents Epaphroditus as supplying the lack by his affectionate, zealous ministry." I think that is exactly what the same words

mean in Colossians 1:24. Christ has prepared a love offering for the world by suffering and dying for sinners. It is full and lacking in nothing—except one thing, a personal presentation by Christ himself to the nations of the world. God's answer to this lack is to call the people of Christ (people like Paul) to make a personal presentation of the afflictions of Christ to the world.

But the most amazing thing about Colossians 1:24 is how Paul completes what is lacking in Christ's afflictions. He says that it is his own sufferings that complete Christ's afflictions. "I rejoice in my sufferings for you and I complete in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ." This means, then, that Paul exhibits the sufferings of Christ by suffering himself *for those he is trying to win*. In his sufferings they see Christ's sufferings. Here is the astounding upshot: God intends for the afflictions of Christ to be presented to the world through the afflictions of his people. God really means for the body of Christ, the church, to experience some of the suffering he experienced so that when we proclaim the cross as the way to life, people will see the marks of the cross in us and feel the love of the cross from us. Our calling is to make the afflictions of Christ real for people by the afflictions we experience in bringing them the message of salvation. Since we are his body, our sufferings are his sufferings. Romanian pastor Joseph Tson put it like this: "I am an extension of Jesus Christ. When I was beaten in Romania, He suffered in my body. It is not my suffering; I only had the honour to share His sufferings." Therefore our sufferings testify to the kind of love Christ has for the world.

This is why Paul spoke of his scars as the "marks of Jesus" (Galatians 6:17). In his wounds people could see Christ's wounds. The point of bearing the marks of Jesus is that Jesus might be seen and his love might work powerfully in those who see. "[We always] carry in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you" (2 Corinthians 4:10-12).

The Blood of the Martyrs is Seed

The history of the expansion of Christianity has proved that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of new life in Christ spreading through the world. For almost three hundred years Christianity grew in soil that was wet with the blood of the martyrs. Every Christian knew that sooner or later he might have to testify to his faith at the cost of his life. When persecution did break out, martyrdom could be attended by the utmost possible publicity. The Roman public was

hard and cruel, but it was not altogether without compassion; and there is no doubt that the attitude of the martyrs, and particularly of the young women who suffered along with the men, made a deep impression: calm, dignified, behaviour, cool courage in the face of torment, courtesy towards enemies, and a joyful acceptance of suffering as the way appointed by the Lord to lead to his heavenly kingdom. There are a number of well-authenticated cases of conversion of pagans in the very moment of witnessing the condemnation and death of Christians; there must have been far more who received impressions that in the course of time would be turned into a living faith.

This explains the triumph of Christianity in the early centuries. They triumphed by their suffering. It did not just accompany their witness, it was *the capstone* of their witness. "They overcame [Satan] because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even to death" (Revelation 12:11).

It is not a fluke of history that the church expands and is strengthened by suffering and martyrdom. This is the way God means it to be. Is it conceivable that Christianity's failure to thrive in the Muslim world is due to the absence of Christian martyrs? And can the Muslim community take seriously the claims of a Church in hiding? The question is not whether it is wise at times to keep worship and witness discreet, but rather how long this may continue before we are guilty of "hiding our light under a bushel." Gregory the Great (pope from 590 to 604), said, "The death of the martyrs blossoms in the lives of the faithful."

The startling implication of this is that the saving purposes of Christ among the nations and in our neighbourhoods will not be accomplished unless Christians choose to suffer. The very suffering of Christians itself is what often provides the means of fruitful evangelism. Every kind of suffering can be a ministry for other people's salvation.

Choosing to Suffer for the Sake of the Nations

Christianity means choosing and embracing a life of suffering for Christ that would be pitiable if Christ proved false. Christianity is not a life that one would embrace as abundant and satisfying without the hope of fellowship with Christ in the resurrection. "Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of me. Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great" Matthew 5:11-12. We do not choose suffering simply because we are told to, but because the one who tells us to describes it as the path to everlasting joy. And no one who truly knows and loves Christ can be content to come to him alone.

Adapted from Desiring God by John Piper