

[Book Thesis: The Power of God Spreads the Gospel]

Suffering in Delight

Suffering is our topic this morning, and suffering in delight is our theme. That may seem contradictory, an oxymoron. How could people like Nicolas Berg's parents find delight in what they're going through? How can Bob McElrath—who recently learned he has a form of cancer be glad in it? How can you not only endure the personal ruin you're going through right now, but rejoice despite it?

Suffering's common to humanity, but even more so to Christians. If you want to avoid suffering, don't follow Jesus, and don't advertise for him. He attracts opposition and the persecution that comes with it. Yet a common testimony among many of His followers who suffer, is joy rather than the descent into the dungeon of unrelenting despair and self-pity.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn wasted away in a Russian prison camp in Kazakstan for 4 years in the 1950's. To spare his wife the ignominy and persecution of being a prisoner's wife, Solzhenitsyn divorced her. For criticizing Stalin, he lost his family, his health, and all that was precious in his life. And yet, for this misery he concluded:

“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.” Delight in suffering is not only possible for the Christian, but normal if we grasp the magnitude of what God did for us in Christ.

PRAY.

FIND Acts 16:16-25. Let's get reoriented: 4 missionaries have stopped in Philippi: Paul, the great church planter, Silas, who is a prophet and leader in the Jerusalem church, Luke, a Greek doctor who wrote Acts, and Timothy, a Jewish-Gentile convert from Paul's first trip. This is Paul's second loop around the Mediterranean Basin to plant churches and encourage existing ones.

Although a key city in Macedonia (modern Greece), Philippi was not originally on the itinerary. On two occasions, places *Paul* wanted to go, God stopped them from going. So he could send them where *He* wanted them to go: Macedonia. READ.

When Jews lived in a city with no synagogue, they met to pray by the nearest riverbank. So Paul would look for prospects there. This is where he met and led Lydia to Christ. Again, the missionaries were traveling to the river when they picked up a shadow. A demonized girl began following them everywhere. The Greek text says she had a “python” spirit which meant she could predict the future. The python was a mythical snake or dragon that once guarded Apollo's temple. However, legend had that the Greek god had killed the snake for harassing his mother. Yet, the monster still spoke

from its grave supposedly and over time, people who spoke the words of demons came to be identified as pythons.

People loved this girl's talent but Paul didn't. Day after day she'd tag along behind yelling, "*These men are servants of the Most High God who are telling you the way to be saved!*" Although her words were essentially true, there were 3 problems:

- While "Most High God" *is* a biblical phrase for God, it was also a generic phrase that could refer to any supreme god of any religion, and "salvation" was also generic, referring to *any* kind of spiritual deliverance. This did not help the gospel.
- Paul did not want the gospel identified with demons
- The girl's incessant pronouncements interfered with evangelism. Satan knew exactly what he was doing.

Once Paul had enough, he whirled on the girl and ordered the demon out. She may have become a Christian a result and if so, she was happy. But not her owners. With the demon gone, their commercial enterprise ground to a halt. Furious, they hauled Paul and Silas before the magistrates and *accused* them—not of ruining their business—but of ...

- Being Jews (prejudice)
- Disturbing the peace (a no-no in the PAX ROMANA)
- Teaching illegal practices

The slave owners had whipped a crowd into a frenzy and whether or not the magistrates believed the charges, they bowed to the will of the mob: "Beat them!" (perhaps Timothy and Luke were spared because they didn't look Jewish, or because they were elsewhere). The Macedonian policemen were called lictors, and wherever they went, servants accompanied them with a bundle of rods with an ax in the middle as the symbol of the authority to punish. Those are the rods they used to "severely" flog Paul and Silas (23)—one of 3 times Paul endured this (2 Cor.11:25). Then they put them in leg stocks deep in the bowels of the prison.

Which is where things got weird. They'd been badly beaten. Then thrown in jail. Then put in leg stocks notched widely enough to produce great pain. And then..., they begin to pray, and sing! pray; sing; sing; pray.

And the prison grew quiet as inmates listened. The conversations and complaints of murderers, insurrectionists, thieves, pimps, and beggars all tapered off as they listened to two fellow inmates. Next week we're going to look at the jailbreak that followed, but for now let's just ponder the oddity of persecuted men singing, and praying. Suffering men, singing and praying.

If we fail to look at this through the grid of the gospel and the grid of the Scriptures, we'll probably just be impressed by their self-discipline or optimism (or maybe we'll wonder if they have a mental disorder). But there was more roaming the jail cell that night than the power of positive thinking.

Although this man had endured 39 lashes on 5 different occasions, been shipwrecked 3 times, often gone without food or water, had sleepless days when he was on the run from danger, Paul was not superhuman. Except for his apostle's call and the gift of healing, Christian, you have everything he had. Being able to sing when your back hurts like crazy or you have cramps in your leg is not the product of your personality or

attitude, it the a supernatural effect on someone who—because he knows well His God—trusts him well. READ 2 Cor.12:9b-10: *Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

Living in the power of Christ reverses our outlook; turns it upside down. What we once liked, we now disdain; what we once despised, we now embrace. What was once weakness to us is now strength, and what was once strength has become weakness.

Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world...? 1 Cor.1:20

God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. I Cor.1:27

Nevertheless, what's the payoff? If I'm going to have delight in something, it must hold some value for me. What's the payoff for suffering? Let me give you 3.

Payoff of Maturity

READ Jas.1:2-4. Count it all joy. Suffering ⇔ perseverance ⇔ maturity. No Christian should be content with immaturity anymore than a 12 year old is content to remain 12 the rest of his life. In Eph.4:13 Paul says that the goal of the great organization, gifts and diversity of the Church, is that we all may become mature. And suffering is the grindstone on which our maturity is sharpened.

Payoff of Hope

READ Rom.5:2b-4. Rejoice in our sufferings. Suffering ⇔ perseverance ⇔ character ⇔ hope. I have been a pastor now for nearly 13 years. You know what the #1 need in people's lives is? Hope. The missing element in a splintering marriage is hope. The missing element in depression is hope. The missing element in overbearing grief, is hope. The missing element in boredom is hope. The missing element in lost people is hope. The missing element in saved people, is hope. Sometimes we've been seduced by the culture into believing hope is to be found in what we own, what we avoid, what we find pleasure in, who cares about us. But hope is found in Jesus Christ and sometimes, he's more clearly seen in suffering than in success.

Payoff of Heaven

READ Acts 14:22. We are on the path to heaven. But between here and there the path is strewn with suffering. READ 2 Cor.4:17. You see, the difference between someone who is consumed by self-pity and the singer, is perspective. Paul and Silas did not sing praise songs when they should have been crying out in pain because they were marines trained to ignore pain. Or because they were stoics who valued appearing disciplined. It was a Spirit-stirred response of redeemed sinners. They felt pain like anyone else; they hurt like anyone else; no doubt there were some tears rolling down their cheeks as they sang and prayed. But to them, what had been taken from them was *nothing* compared to what they still had: their adoption papers as sons of God. READ Rom.8:17-18.

Concl:

What if God took all your children in an auto accident today? Or you find out tomorrow you have six weeks to live? Or you get fired 2 years before your 20 years are up and you lose some of your pension. Why is it that some people can still smile after such things while some never recover? How some can say through their tears, “It is well with my soul!”?

The American way of life is an antiseptic one: air bags, antibacterial soap, guard rails, physical workouts, policemen in the schools. We lust after a risk-free existence; safety and security have become premier values. Yet here is a man willing to teach the willing how to suffer in delight. Strength comes not from the condition of our bodies, but the condition of our hearts.

Paul and Silas had their legs stretched apart in wooden stocks but one of the early church fathers, Tertullian said, *The legs feel nothing in the stocks when the heart is in heaven.*

Is your heart in heaven? Or rooted deeply on earth? When your earthly body, possessions, and blessings are modified or taken, how do you we react? Envy, self-pity, anger at God..., or rejoicing?

I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want: I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. Phil.4:12-13.

I stand amazed in the presence
Of Jesus the Nazarene,
And wonder how he could love me,
A sinner, condemned, unclean.
How marvelous, How wonderful!
And my song shall ever be...
How marvelous How wonderful,
Is my Savior's love for me.