

Romans 8:15-19

“When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is the Spirit Himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God;”

Over the past few of years there has been a popular pair of movies which came from an animated series during our son's childhood, and which our grandson loves called "Transformers." The plot of these movies is about two types of alien robots which have invaded Earth. One alien force is called the "Decepticons." These are an evil group of robots whose only goal is to annihilate everything living in their path. The other robots are called "Transformers" they are dedicated to protecting the very things the Decepticons are focused on destroying.

Their conflict mirrors the truths of Scripture. The Bible tells us that there is a force intent on damaging and destroying as much of God's creation as possible. This force, which is known as Satan, could justifiably be called a Decepticon because one of its principle weapons is deception. But God has always sought to protect His creation, and one of His principle tools is that of transformation – transforming that which is weak, bruised, and wounded into that which is strong and resilient. One of the most powerful tools of transformation is one God has used throughout all of Scripture "suffering."

In this 8th chapter of Romans, Paul teaches that an indwelling of the Holy Spirit, which we heard about last week, bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children of God, then heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Jesus Christ. Notice though, that in verse 17 of this chapter Paul finishes this sentence of being heirs with “*provided we suffer with Him.*” This week’s focus on the Apostle’s Creed is “*he suffered under Pontius Pilate,*” but before I go further maybe we should define the term suffering as it applies to our relationship to Christ and the world. For most of us, the word “suffering” conjures up mental images of people in great physical pain, or financial difficulty, emotional stress, oppression by those over us, attack on our persons, etc.

Suffering, in reference to the believer, covers a much broader spectrum, although patient/prayerful suffering no matter how slight, is seen as an acceptable sacrifice by God, who really considers life as a believer in this world as a sharing in the sufferings of Jesus? To explain what I mean, let me say it this way: God could conceivably have taken each of us out of this

world to Heaven the moment we were saved, but He has left us here, why; To be His voice; His representatives in the world, and to continue with our education, being made through testing, trials, blessings and revelation, more like our Lord.

But the mindset that most of us live with day by day seems to contradict the idea of suffering, either willingly or unwillingly with Christ; and most of our efforts seem aimed to avoid suffering in any shape or form. Paul on the other hand saw suffering as a blessing, to be identified in this way with the One who suffered so much for us. Paul linked suffering with heirship, with hope; with glorification it's all here in this chapter.

We, on the other hand, pray most often not for strength development for our suffering, but for deliverance. What are we missing? What are we failing to understand? Let's look closer at the specific verses of our focus today, and ask the Spirit to help us see the message there from God's perspective in contrast to our own perspective. *"For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God..... provided we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him."*

Even the Apostle Paul suffered. He writes in 2 Corinthians: *“Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things I am not indignant (resentful)?”*

Suffering in this world is inevitable all people will suffer, Christians will suffer. Now, sometimes we suffer in this life because we deserve to. We've made bad decisions. Proverbs 13:15 tells us that *“... the way of the unfaithful is hard.”* The way of the unfaithful is hard because they've walked away from God. They've neglected their faith, they've decide that sin is more fun than following, and because they've made those decisions, they're destined to live difficult, harsh and unfulfilling lives. .

But a lot of times, Christians suffer just because we live in an evil world, and the pain in our lives is caused by the evil that is in this world. And especially because we belong to God, our enemy is Satan, and Satan hates God so much that he'll try to hurt us whenever and wherever he can. The bad news is: We don't get a choice – if we stand for Jesus we will suffer. The good news is: We do have a choice in how we respond to that suffering.

In his old age, the great French painter Renoir suffered from arthritis. The disease twisted and cramped his hand. One his artist friends, Henri Matisse, watched sadly while Renoir, grasping a brush with only his fingertips, continued to paint, even though each movement caused stabbing pain. One day, Matisse asked Renoir why he persisted in painting at the expense of such torture. Renoir replied, “The pain will pass, but the beauty remains forever.” Renoir couldn't avoid his suffering... but he chose how he responded to it. Have you suffered for God lately?

Now, our advantage as Christians is that not only can we choose how we respond to suffering, but we can take comfort in the fact that this very suffering can be used by God to transform us into better disciples. Suffering can transform us so that God can make better use of us.

That's why James 1 tells us to "*Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*"

James is essentially saying: Pain makes us grow up. It completes us. It helps us mature us as Christians. That which Satan would use to destroy us is the tool God can use to transform us to make us stronger in our faith. That's because people who endure the flames of suffering can better handle the hardships of life.

In 1991, a fire raged through Oakland, CA destroying a number of houses in its path. One of those homes it belonged to a preacher. His home was totally destroyed, reducing most of the family's possessions to little more than burnt ashes. But one item did survive intact: a small porcelain rabbit figurine. The next Sunday, the preacher took the item into the pulpit and explained his recent loss. Holding up the small figurine, he noted that it was the sole surviving keepsake from the fire and he dwelt on the unusual fact that it alone survived the flames.

Why, he asked, would this small item escape damage when nothing else did? He smiled and said: “Because it had already been through a fire once.” “That which Satan would use to destroy us is the tool God can use to transform us/ to make us stronger in our faith.”

When we allow God to work in and through our suffering, God can use our pain to strengthen us as the metal worker uses fire to refine gold and silver and burn off impurities in those metals. The metal worker puts the metals into the furnace and exposes them to the fire. The heat from the fire melts the silver or gold into a liquid substance, and the impurities float to the top and are skimmed away. The resulting metals are purer and thus more valuable, why? Because they’ve been ‘refined.’

With God beside us in our suffering our weeping will only last so long. But He’ll turn our sorrow to joy, and ultimately, because we’ve trusted Him, He’ll give us something that will last forever. Not just blessings in this life, but even more powerfully in the day when Jesus returns: In Romans 8:18 Paul declares “*I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.*”

The blessings of God in this present world can only offset the pain of so much suffering, but when Jesus comes again as it says in Revelation 21:4, *“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”*

That’s why everyone has an open invitation at the end of every service. What a shame it would be if, after having gone through all the difficulties of this life we missed out on the greatest blessing God wants to give us. Wouldn’t it be a shame if you missed the glory that God wants to bestow upon you because simply because you chose to reject Him because you were not happy. We need to remember it’s not about us and our personal happiness it’s about God. Are you ready to suffer for Him or are those just words said from the head and really far from the heart?