

12. SUFFERING FOLLOWED BY GLORY – THE PATTERN FOR DISCIPLES

We have a right to total victory. I want you to get that down on the inside. Not partial victory to where we have a good family, we have good health, but we constantly struggle in our finances. That's not total victory . . . Maybe God has blessed you. You have a good family, a good job, but you've had pain in your body for years and years. You used to stand against it. You used to believe you could be free. But now it's been so long you've just decided 'This is my lot in life. Joel, this is my cross to carry' . . . Let me assure you, he didn't create you to be average. He didn't create you to barely get by, to have all kinds of things holding you back. You've got to get the right vision. God created you to be totally free, to have peace in your mind, to walk in divine health, to have good relationships, to have plenty to pay your bills. God created us as victors and not victims. Fight the good fight of faith. Know who you are, the seed of Abraham. You have rights and privileges. One of those privileges is total victory.

So says Joel Osteen, best-selling author, preaching to his megachurch in Texas. But can Christians live in total victory?

We've seen how the pattern of the cross and resurrection – the pattern of suffering followed by glory – was not only the pattern for Jesus, but is also the pattern for the world. The pattern of the cross and resurrection applies in the same way to believers. We follow the way of the cross. The cross is the essential mark of Christian discipleship. We follow the way of the cross, not the way of glory. But we follow the way of the cross sustained by the hope of coming glory. The pattern of Christian experience conforms to the pattern of Christ's own experience. The way of the cross is followed by the glory of the resurrection. Suffering followed by glory.

In Acts 13 – 14, Luke describes how Paul and Barnabas planted churches in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium and Lystra on the outward leg of their first missionary journey, before ending up in Derbe. Then they came back again through Lystra, Iconium and Antioch (14:21). Luke tells us they returned, 'strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith'. What would you say to strengthen and encourage brand new churches? What are the important truths they need to hear? This is how Luke summarizes the words of Paul and Barnabas: 'We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God' (22). Suffering followed by glory. This is basic Christianity.

Many of those new believers would have been Jewish. They expected the coming of the Messiah to usher in God's kingdom along with the defeat of God's enemies and the vindication of God's people. Now the Messiah had come. The new age had begun. But God's people were still hard-pressed. This they didn't expect! They needed to know that the sufferings they were facing didn't negate the message they'd heard. The kingdom had come now in a hidden way and only in the

future would it come in a glorious way. In the meantime, God's people would have to go through many hardships.

We find this suffering–glory pattern running through Paul's theology. In Romans 8 he says, 'We share in [Christ's] sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us' (Romans 8:17–18). The pattern of suffering followed by glory is a pattern we share with Christ. And it's a necessary pattern: we share in the sufferings of Christ *in order that* we might share in his glory. The point is not that we earn glory by suffering. The point is that there's no other road to glory except the Jerusalem road.

It's because of this suffering–glory pattern that Paul can argue that suffering leads ultimately to hope. The experience of suffering is a confirmation that we will share in 'the hope of the glory of God' (Romans 5:2–4). In the light of such hope, Paul can say that 'just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows' (2 Corinthians 1:5, 7). Richard Bauckham comments:

Paul's experience might often seem outwardly unremarkable. But because he sees the death and resurrection of Jesus as the key to his life, as to everything else, he can find there a pattern which makes Christian sense of his experience. The shape which everyone needs to give to his experience in order to understand it Paul found in the cross and resurrection of Jesus . . . All the ups and downs of his ministry were for Paul experiences *of God*, events in which he experienced an identification with Jesus in his dying and rising.⁴⁶

The writer of Hebrews commends to us the faith of 'the cloud of witnesses' from the Old Testament. But their faith

is defined as 'being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see' (Hebrews 11:1). These were people who lived sacrificially in the present because of their confidence in the glorious future that God promises. It's the suffering–glory pattern again. The climax of the section is the example of Jesus himself 'who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God' (12:2). There again is the pattern of suffering followed by glory, shame followed by joy, the cross followed by enthronement. This is our model and inspiration: 'Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart' (12:3).

This pattern of suffering followed by glory also runs throughout 1 Peter. We've already seen the way Peter calls us to the way of the cross. 'To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps' (1 Peter 2:21). The cross is the model for citizens (2:13–17) and slaves (2:18–25), for wives and husbands (3:1–7), and for all Christians in their suffering (3:8–22). But this call to the way of the cross is set in a bigger context – the pattern of suffering followed by glory.

Peter refers to Christians as 'aliens and strangers' (1:1; 2:11). Our present experience is one of alienation and dislocation because we've become citizens of God's coming world. We're looking forward to a new home: 'a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness' (2 Peter 3:13). We've been given 'new birth into a living hope', a future 'inheritance'. Meanwhile in the present we rejoice in this hope while we 'suffer grief in all kinds of trials' (1 Peter 1:3–6). Suffering followed by glory.

The Spirit of God in the prophets was predicting 'the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow' (1:11). In other words, the (Old Testament) Scriptures point to this



pattern of suffering followed by glory. Now the pattern of suffering and glory in the experience of Christ has become the experience of all believers as we participate with Christ.

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

(1 Peter 4:12–13)

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow-elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

(1 Peter 5:1–4)

Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility towards one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.' Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.

(1 Peter 5:5–6)

We can rejoice in sufferings because, as we participate in the sufferings of Christ, we find assurance that we'll participate in the glory of Christ. Peter appeals to leaders on the basis that he is a witness of Christ's suffering and glory. Why does he appeal to them in this way? Because this is to be their pattern. They're to serve, willingly and selflessly, following the model laid



down by Christ (Mark 10:42–45). But they do this in the hope of a ‘crown of glory that will never fade away’. As Christians, we are to humble ourselves so that God might lift us up. Humility followed by exaltation. Suffering followed by glory.

One dimension of this pattern is that of submission followed by vindication. Christ submitted to his unjust sufferings, trusting himself to God (2:23), and as a result he was vindicated by God (3:17–22). Likewise, Christians are to entrust themselves to God, confident in future glory (4:12–19). ‘If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you’ (1 Peter 4:14).

Peter concludes by saying that he has written, ‘encouraging you and testifying that this is the true grace of God’ (5:12). What is this true grace of God? The preceding verses say: ‘And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen’ (1 Peter 5:10–11) The true grace of God, the grace that makes him ‘the God of all grace’, consists of this: he has called us to eternal glory after we’ve suffered a little while. Suffering followed by glory.

Peter needs to write to confirm that this is the *true* grace of God because then, as now, there are *false* versions of grace. Such versions of grace promise glory now or glory without suffering.

- It’s a false grace of God when Christians claim they can leave behind the struggle with sin, and live a higher life resting on God.
- It’s a false grace of God when Christians claim they can leave behind struggles of sickness, and claim full and unbroken health.

- It's a false grace of God when Christians claim they can leave behind the struggles and humility of mission, and claim victory over people and areas.
- It's a false grace of God when Christians claim they can leave behind suffering and sacrifice, and claim prosperity.
- It's a false grace of God when Christians claim they can leave behind the hiddenness of God's kingdom, and complete the task of mission through grand buildings, political influence, dynamic strategies, global structures, charismatic personalities or megachurches.

An eschatology of the cross

As we saw in the last chapter, the great Reformer Martin Luther distinguished between what he called theologies of glory and a theology of the cross. Theologies of glory seek to know God through human reflection on the power and glory of his actions, while a theology of the cross sees the ultimate revelation of God in the cross. On the cross, faith sees power in weakness, victory in failure and glory in shame.

In the same way, we need to distinguish between eschatologies of glory and an eschatology of the cross.⁴⁷ Eschatologies of glory seek the glory and victory of the resurrection without accepting the reality of the cross in the present. But an eschatology of the cross looks forward to glory and victory, but recognizes that in the present they're hidden in shame and weakness.

The eschatology of the cross recognizes that the kingdom of God is hidden now and that its glory lies in the future. Eschatologies of glory, in contrast, expect the glory that belongs to the future to come now, in the present. They expect to move beyond the sacrifice, suffering and submission of the

cross to perfection, glory and triumph. They want power and status and honour in the present.

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and to wish to acquire on earth what should be sought in heaven’. Calvin comments, ‘It is enough that the faithful receive a taste of these good things now, that they may cherish the hope of their full enjoyment in the future.’⁴⁸ He speaks of hope not only sustaining faith, but also restraining it.⁴⁹ The very fact that we hope reminds us

that we haven’t yet received our full redemption (Romans 8:24–25).

Again and again in the New Testament, alongside hope we find patience and long-suffering.

For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, *we wait for it patiently.*

(Romans 8:24–25)

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.

(Romans 12:12)

Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord’s coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. You too, *be patient* and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near.

(James 5:78)



‘Since you have kept my command *to endure patiently*, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth.’

(Revelation 3:10; see also 1:9; 2:2, 19)

But patience and long-suffering are not common characteristics among Western Christians. Modern Westerners expect good health as a norm. We call for public enquires because we think every disaster can be avoided. And Christians are not so very different. We expect God to keep us healthy and safe. So when trouble comes – as Jesus promises it will (John 16:33) – we not only struggle to cope with the problem; we also can’t make sense of what God is doing. ‘Why doesn’t he answer my prayers?’ ‘Is my faith too weak?’ The result is that people struggling with turmoil in their circumstances are beset at the same time with turmoil in their hearts – a crisis that could have been avoided by a proper eschatology. Commenting on Hebrews 11:1, Calvin writes:

Eternal life is promised to us, but it is promised to the dead; we are told of the resurrection of the blessed, but meantime we are involved in corruption; we are declared to be just, and sin dwells within us; we hear that we are blessed, but meantime we are overwhelmed by untold miseries; we are promised an abundance of all good things, but we are often hungry and thirsty; God proclaims that he will come to us immediately, but seems to be deaf to our cries. What would happen to us if we did not rely on hope, and if our minds did not emerge above the world out of the midst of darkness through the shining Word of God and by his Spirit?⁵⁰

Anne Steele (1716–1778) lost her mother when she was just three years old. At nineteen, she had a severe hip injury which made her a lifelong invalid. Then when she was



twenty-one, her fiancé drowned the day before they were to be married. This woman, whose life was touched by so much tragedy, wrote:

Thou lovely source of true delight,
whom I unseen adore,
unveil thy beauties to my sight
that I might love thee more.

Thy glory o'er creation shines,
but in thy sacred Word
I read in fairer, brighter lines
my bleeding, dying Lord.

'Tis here, whene'er my comforts droop
and sin and sorrow rise,
thy love with cheering beams of hope
my fainting heart supplies.

But ah! Too soon the pleasing scene
is clouded o'er with pain.
My gloomy fears rise dark between
and I again complain.

Jesus, my Lord, my life, my light,
oh come with blissful ray.
Break radiant through the shades of night
and chase my fears away.

Then shall my soul with rapture trace
the wonders of thy love.
But the full glories of thy face
are only known above.

Betty Carlson tells the story of her friend, Gladys, who has spent the last few years bed-bound. 'From this unique pulpit,' writes Carlson, 'she carries on a more spirited mission programme than many entire churches.' Unable to sleep, she corresponds with missionaries around the world in the early hours. Their neighbour sees the light in her window when he goes out to milk his cows. 'Well, I see Gladys is writing letters again,' he often comments to Gladys's husband. 'Gladys has accepted this as a gift of God to be able to encourage others,' comments Carlson. 'Rather than lie sleepless and concentrate on her pain and other problems, she has learned that the hours pass quickly when thinking of others. Rarely do her letters mention her illness. Actually they are hymns of praise to God, her Lord and Saviour, who has reached down and given her happiness and an overflowing heart in the midst of her personal difficulties.⁵¹

Peter describes our trials as being for 'a little while' (1 Peter 1:6). Paul says our troubles are 'light and momentary' (2 Corinthians 4:17). Both Peter and Paul were imprisoned and probably martyred. So they weren't being flippant. By our standards their trials were heavy and sustained. But imagine looking back after a million, billion years of eternal glory. Then our trials will indeed seem light and momentary. Paul says:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

(2 Corinthians 4:16–18)