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Suffering and Glory

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: Hebrews 11:32-40, 2 Corinthians 11:23-33; Colossians 1:24; 2 Timothy 2:3.

It is a remarkable combination which we find in those first people of God - the combination of suffering and joy. It is not easy for us to put ourselves into the atmosphere and conditions in Jerusalem in those first days, but there is no doubt about it that it was a perilous time. The crucifying of the Lord Jesus had by no means satiated the lust of His enemies. We know quite well from the story of Saul a little later that everyone who was of "THE WAY" was an object of that blood lust, and there was a mighty hostility raging in the hearts of those enemies of Christ. We know that His followers had to meet sometimes behind closed and barred doors. And yet we find that the word 'praise' abounded in their midst. "With gladness and singleness of heart, praising God" (Acts 2:46,47) is the phrase. Yes, even when they had been haled before the magistrates, threatened and made to understand very clearly what the consequences would be for them if they persisted in their course, they rejoiced, it says, "that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonour for the Name" (Acts 5:41); a great mingling of joy with suffering.

The night in which the Lord was betrayed was a night of solemnity and heaviness, and there were deep shadows in that upper room; yet there was One Who could take the cup, knowing all that the cup meant, and give thanks, and, as a last thing before they went out, suggest that they should sing a hymn. So you pass through the New Testament and you come on such wonderful passages as those we have just read. Here is Paul recounting his sufferings, most of which we know nothing about so far as a detailed record is concerned - a long list of intense sufferings; but making it clear

that he gloried, rejoiced, in his sufferings. And that eleventh chapter of Hebrews, too, does not conclude with a dirge, but in triumph; and you cannot fail to feel as you read through verse after verse that here is strength, here is triumph, here is ascendancy, there is nothing mournful here.

What does all this say to us? It is all gathered into the Table of the Lord. To His disciples He said, "Are ye able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" (Matt. 20:22,23); and that for them was the cup of passion, the cup of suffering. It was the filling up of that which was lacking in the sufferings of Christ, given to His Church (Col. 1:24); and suffering it was. They were drinking the cup even unto death.

But take up whichever you like of those men. If there was one man in all the circle who ought never to have sung or rejoiced again, never to have gone about the world with his head lifted up again, who ought to have had the most melancholy voice and look, always trying to let people know what a miserable mess he had made of things, it was Peter. But listen to Peter - "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:3). (The word 'blessed' there is the word which means 'praised.'). *"Praised be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who according to His great mercy (Peter knew what he was taking about) begat us again (Unto the most awful despair? No!) unto a lively hope"* (not "a living hope"; the word is much more emphatic than that. You can be living without being lively. There are quite a lot of people who are living, but are not a bit lively) - *"unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."* There is something of tremendous hopefulness, and optimism in that. And it was the same with the other Apostles.

Accepting The Fellowship Of His Sufferings

Now, what is the point again: Well, first of all, we must face the fact and we must seek help from God always to bear in mind that we are going to have a path of suffering if we are in fellowship with the Lord Jesus. That is one side. Perhaps it is because we have not at the outset calculated with that that we have such a long-drawn-out period of joylessness and defeat. There has to come a point when we sit down and do some calculating and come to a definite conclusion on this matter - that, although very often we may not be able to see that our suffering is because of our relationship to Him (the sufferings are so manifold and diverse, and very often they look as though they have no relationship at all with our Christian life) at the same time, whether we can discern it or not; the fact remains that the pathway of the child of God, of the fellow of Jesus Christ, is the pathway of suffering. I say, postponement or delay in settling that matter keeps us all the time in that state of hoping and waiting for it to be different, and, because the difference does not come, getting downcast and feeling that all is wrong and that the Lord is against us and all that sort of thing, thus giving all the ground that the enemy wants for destroying our testimony. The very first thing to remember when we take this cup is that while we are taking it as the cup of salvation, while we are remembering the atonement which is in the Blood, and all the wonderful redemption which is ours because of that Blood, the cup does also speak to us of fellowship with His suffering. It is *His* cup, it is filling up that which is lacking - the remainder - of the afflictions of Christ for His Body's sake which is the Church. We are not able to see the values of that in ourselves - we are kept far too occupied with the cost, the suffering and the trial - but oh, some looking on are able to see a marvellous spiritual growth, a wonderful refinement of spirit, the beautifying of the life. Yes, there is something which is going up to His praise and glory as Christ is being formed through the fires of adversity and suffering. It is fellowship with Him in His sufferings, after all, if it is bringing about more Christlikeness. So our first thing is to reckon with this and get it settled.

What are you expecting, what are you waiting for, what are you concerned about, what are you pleading and praying for? If you are praying for full and final deliverance from adversity and suffering and difficulty and all that sort of thing, let me tell you your prayer will never be answered. Forms of suffering may change, but in some form or another we are going on to the end in a way of adversity. Satan is not going to become our friend while we are friends of Jesus Christ. The kingdom of Satan is not going to rally to our support while we belong to the kingdom which is opposed to his. Let us settle that. It will get us free, perhaps, from this entanglement.

Deliverance Without Deliverance

And the next thing is that there is deliverance while there is no deliverance. There is a passage of Scripture which probably has often puzzled you. It seems to be something that recoils upon itself and says that it is not true. *"God is faithful, Who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation make also the way of escape, that ye may be able to endure it"* (1 Cor. 10:13). What do you make of that - 'escape by enduring it'? That is not getting away from it, that is getting on top of it. Paul pleaded about that thorn in his flesh, that it might be removed; thrice he sought the Lord concerning this thing, but the Lord said, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for My power is made perfect in weakness." And Paul's reaction was - "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me... for when I am weak, then am I strong" (2 Cor. 12:8-10). Paul was not delivered from that "messenger of Satan." That is the bald way of describing his trial. It may be taken to cover your particular trial - that difficult person with whom you have to live, or whatever else it may be. Let us come right to the point, and say, 'It is something that the devil wants to use for my undoing, for the ruination of my testimony, and the Lord has definitely and deliberately permitted that.' Paul was not delivered from that stake in the flesh, that messenger of Satan that constantly buffeted him; *and yet he was delivered!* "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my weaknesses"; like that old warrior in the Old Testament, who said, "Give me this mountain" (Joshua 14:12); 'do not remove this mountain, do not get it out of the way; give it to me, give me a chance to master it, to bring it under, to gain ascendancy!'

Now, this is no easy, glib talk. It is the outcome of a good deal of personal exercise. God knows how we have cried and sought for deliverances which have not come. Forgive this personal word to back home what I have been saying. During this past week or two I have been praying very much about that thorn in the flesh, that messenger of Satan, and I did not see the Lord answering in any way at all. And during the same time I have been reading some books. I have been reading again the life of Wesley, and of Whitfield, and the story of the Scottish Covenanters; and then I found myself reading 2 Corinthians 11; and suddenly pieced the whole thing together. Oh, those terrible sufferings of John Wesley! Up and down the country, often laid prostrate with physical weakness and suffering; in every town persecuted, mocked, stoned, or dragged by the hair; what a time that man had! And his brother Charles shared it. The Scottish Covenanters - why, one is made to blush with shame in reading the awful sufferings, the martyrdoms, the tortures of those people; hunted, without food, without homes, having to live on the open hillside, in caves, anywhere. And here is Paul giving us his list. Oh, should we all the time be stipulating that our lot ought to be very much easier? And yet they triumphed. What a triumph was Wesley's! We sing, 'Oh, for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise.' Do you know that Wesley did not mean what we usually think he meant when he wrote those words? We think he meant, 'Oh, that I had a thousand tongues!' He and his brother had been into a town for some meetings. Only a few people came and they poured out their hearts to the Lord. Then they went out and saw a great mob in the street, coming from a sports event, and John Wesley said to his brother, 'Oh, for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise.' It

is the same thing in effect. 'Oh, for thousands of tongues that are out there to sing my great Redeemer's praise!' Those were their sentiments. That is triumph!

The Lord's Table is a blending of joy with suffering, but I do not believe that the Lord is going to make any changes in our circumstances until we have got on top of them. Whatever change of situation and conditions may be in His will, actual deliverance will wait until we are delivered in this inward way from our spirit of stipulating that we cannot go on unless the Lord provides better conditions for us. Such a spirit is a denial of grace, that is a denial of His sufficiency. "My grace is sufficient for thee... Most gladly therefore..." No, the way out is up; the way of victory is over, not from. So before ever anything changes, we have somehow got to find the grace that will result in our being filled with joy. Sometimes, with Peter, we are "put to grief in manifold trials"; sometimes, with Paul, we are "smitten down"; but if we will give the grace of God a chance there is the old joy back again! Give it a chance! It is there, it is not quenched, it is not dead. The point is, what is the normal? Is the normal - misery, depression, melancholy? Or do these mark us only for the time being, sometimes? Is the normal - Joy, hopefulness, optimism? Some people, I am afraid, have the idea that they are going to give something away if they smile. It will not do. There must be about us, after all, something bubbling up which is not just ourselves. It is the Lord.

So we come to the Lord's Table. As we take the cup, we shall, on the one side, have that reckoning - 'I know what this means: the fellowship of His sufferings: to take my share of hardness with the apostles and the prophets; by the grace of God, I take the cup.' But there is also the other side - rejoicing to be counted worthy to suffer for His name and realizing that through His Blood there is the begetting again to a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

May we have grace to seek the Lord with this resolve, that by His grace we are not going to capitulate but to triumph, even in the time of trial and suffering, and find our deliverance in that way. "God... will make... the way of escape, that ye may be able to endure it."