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The Fellowship of His Sufferings (1951)

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: 2 Corinthians 1:3-5; 2 Corinthians 6:8-13; 2 Corinthians 2:4; 2 Corinthians 11:23-28; 1 Corinthians 4:9-13; 2 Corinthians 1:8-10.

"The sufferings of Christ abound unto us" 2 Cor. 1:5.

There is a very great deal summed up in the passages we have just read, but what I have on my heart to say will be confined to two things; firstly, the sufferings and the suffering, and secondly, the need and the values of suffering.

The Fact And Range Of Suffering

Little need be said, I think, as to the fact of the sufferings. We know the people of God are not exempt from sufferings. That, I think, need not be laboured. But there are many sufferings into which they enter *because they are the people of God*; and that, perhaps, needs a little thinking about. There are sufferings we may bring upon ourselves, sufferings which need not be, but I am not thinking about those. I am speaking about the sufferings of Christ, of the fact of these, and that they are the common lot of the people of God, and that when they come upon us, there is nothing wrong in that. Indeed, we shall see before we are through that it is quite to the contrary.

But when you think about these sufferings, with Paul as the great example and interpreter, you are led to see that these are not just incidents, local or earthly things. Even when they take legal and earthly form and colouring by reason of situations and circumstances and events, they have a far greater range than anything incidental, local, temporal, earthly. The range of these sufferings is no less than the spiritually universal. They reach out beyond ourselves, our circle, our lives, our time,

and beyond anything here and now. I would use the word 'dispensational' but for its being perhaps misunderstood. Paul's sufferings comprehended the dispensation and are virtuous to-day after so many centuries, and have touched every realm of the celestial and the diabolical. These sufferings are more than just incidents in life, painful as they may be. They are set within a vast realm of significance and effectiveness. They are, in the main, the 'kick-back' of a vast and mighty system of antagonism to everything that is of Christ.

We must therefore accept the fact of such sufferings, and adjust to the spiritual significance of it. If you and I ever do get the idea that the Christian life is to be a perpetual picnic, we shall get ourselves into all kinds of difficulties and perplexities and disappointments. If we seek to escape from the sufferings of Christ, we are going to cut the very vitals of our spiritual worth-whileness. Take heed to that. We have to accept the fact that, being the Lord's here, our inheritance is an inheritance of the sufferings of Christ, and we must not seek to avoid them.

The Suffering Within The Sufferings

But then I used the words, the sufferings and the suffering; the plural and the singular. The suffering-that is, the suffering which is within the sufferings. Sometimes it is the suffering which brings about the sufferings. Take Paul, for instance, and the suffering to which he refers in II Corinthians 1:8-10 *"our affliction which befell us in Asia"*. The word 'affliction' there is from a Latin root which means 'a flail', and it pictures the wielding of a flail upon the naked body of a bound man, bruising and breaking and battering; it is a strong word. Paul says that is what happened to him in Asia. *"Weighed down exceedingly, beyond our power, insomuch that we despaired even of life: yea, we ourselves have had the sentence of death within ourselves..."* "We had the answer to our enquiry; the answer was - It is death!"

Now, that is the suffering within the sufferings. You do not think for a moment that that was just a physical matter. A man who could go through all those experiences which are recorded of Paul, and who could say that to depart and be with Christ was far better, was not afraid of dying. Not at all! There must have been some suffering within the sufferings. *"Weighed down exceedingly, beyond our power"*: that was something inward; it was not because he was desperately ill and might die at any moment. What then is this? It may have been due to the report that came to him of conditions in Corinth, for it was at this time that he received the news of the terrible state of things in Corinth recorded in these letters, and he speaks of *"that which presseth upon me daily, anxiety for all the churches"* (2 Cor. 11:28). Even if it was physical sickness that assailed him, we know that sickness in the body is very often caused by grief of heart; the outward sufferings are sometimes the result of inward distress. Thus we have the suffering within the sufferings.

There is a spiritual suffering for Christ's sake; and that which Paul speaks of in this portion as "the sentence of death", though beyond our explanation, yet does seem to suggest that he got into a terrible state spiritually because of certain conditions. If I were to try to reshape this situation, I should say, Paul had received this terribly bad news about the state of things in the church at Corinth, with more perhaps from other directions as well, and he had gone down under his suffering and said, 'Is it worth it? Is it not all in vain? Is it not an utterly hopeless situation? Am I not wasting my life in pouring it out for such people?' When you start like that, there is no end. You can go down and down until waters of despair gradually close over you. You try to pray and you cannot, for a doubting man can never pray. He may cry, but he cannot pray. A man who has let go to that sort of thing cannot pray; heaven is closed. And Paul, so to speak, interrogates himself and says, 'What is the meaning of this?' The answer is, 'It is death; along that line it is death; if you get down there, there is no way through and no way up; that is the end of everything - death!'

I am not going further with that to see how Paul came to the turning point and to the so great deliverance. That is not in our present consideration. My point at the moment is that death here was spiritual, not physical. He was tasting something of the real nature of death. Death is a sense of being excluded from God, of heaven being closed, of there being no way through and no way out, shut up and shut in, at the end of everything; and that registered in or upon your soul. That is more than physical death. Some of us more than once would have been glad to die physically. But this other thing is spiritual death, and it is terrible, it is awful; there is no gladness about that. To taste that is to know something of the sufferings of Christ. Those sufferings may be known along other lines, but we are not attempting here to define in detail the whole range of Christ's sufferings, but only to stress the fact of them.

The Need And Values Of The Sufferings Of Christ

What is the point for us? Everyone of you will have to make your own application, for I do not know why I am led to this message; the Lord only knows His own wisdom. But there are some very practical matters bound up with this; and so we come to the second part of our subject, namely, the need and the values of this kind of suffering. Let it be settled with us once for all that the sufferings of Christ are an absolute necessity. I am going to say a very strong thing, and it is this-that if you know nothing about the sufferings of Christ, there is something wrong with you as a Christian. I am not, of course, speaking of such as have only just entered upon the Christian life, though suffering is sometimes encountered right from the first. But obedience and faithfulness soon lead to the experience of some form of Christ's sufferings. If you are avoiding those sufferings, if you are rebelling against them, you are taking an entirely wrong line. They are the true lot of children of God. I do not say that you will each have them in the same measure or of the same kind, but you will have them. Ask the Lord if your bad times may not, after all, fit into this. You have been thinking of them merely as circumstances, as disappointments, working out to your misfortune, your disadvantage. But wait; see whether these are not, after all, bound up with your spiritual life, whether they do not bear a relationship to your spiritual growth. Interrogate yourself, examine this question.

Reality By Suffering

They are necessary for several things; first of all, to keep things real, practical and up-to-date. The Lord is not going to allow any one of us to live upon a past, upon a theory, upon a tradition, upon a doctrine as a doctrine. He will allow us to live only on what is real and practical and up-to-date, and, being made as we are, we do not so live unless we are made to. I could make a lot of personal confessions now, but they would not be of very much value except by way of illustration. If I know even a little about the Lord and the Lord's things, I can tell you perfectly frankly it is because of suffering. I could not and would not have learned unless the Lord had made me learn, and taught me in a very deep and practical school where things were kept right up-to-date, and where every bit of ministry sprang out of some new experience. It is a law which applies to us all. The fact is that these sufferings are absolutely essential to keep things real; and you know as well as I do that people want reality. They have a right to say, 'How did you get to know that? Have you proved that? How much has that been to you in the deepest hours of life, when things were beyond your power? Did that prove to be true then?' If we are not able to say with all our heart in utter sincerity, 'I found the Lord to be like that in my actual experience; I have put that truth to a thorough test and proved it', then we are frauds. The Lord has no place for frauds; therefore He keeps us up-to-date. Reality is by suffering.

Growth By Suffering

Progress and growth are also secured by this means. All nature declares it. Growth, development, increase, is by that expanding power which creates a creak and a groan and an ache within the organism; and in the spiritual life it is like that. We speak about growing pains. I believe that is considered to be unscientific now, but it is a very useful phrase. Yes, there are growing pains, and the sufferings of Christ in the members of His Body are related to growth. The difference is this, that in what we have called growing pains it is the growing that is actually taking place which causes the pains, while here, in what we have before us, it is the pains which produce the growth afterward. We grow by means of suffering, there is no doubt about it. Show me a mature spiritual life, and you show me the embodiment of much suffering of some kind-not always physical-a life which has gone through things. Paul found his turning point there - "*that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raiseth the dead*"; a new discovery from the depths. Where he touched bottom, he discovered God in a new way-"*God who raiseth the dead*". Such knowing of Him comes along that line. The values of suffering are there.

Ability By Suffering

But then note what he says in this first chapter again - "God... *who comforteth us in all our affliction, that we may be able...*" Oh, there is a lot in that! That speaks of stock in trade, the means for service, does it not? We may often have bad times about our lack of ability in many ways, comparing ourselves with other people and deploring our lack of ability in this and that. Oh, for ability! But what is the greatest ability after all? The best and most fruitful ability is to be able to help people in the deep experiences of spiritual life; to be able to explain to them the meaning of God's dealings with them, to be able to show them what is intended to be the outcome of it all, to be able to give them some support by counsel which comes from real knowledge - some of that comfort which we ourselves have received of God. That is real service, that is building up the Body of Christ, the House of God - being really able, in a spiritual way, to strengthen the sorrowing. That comes through suffering.

Now, are you going through it, having a bad time? What are you putting it down to? Are you the Lord's? Is your life committed to Him? Then see if you really can rightly and properly separate between your bad time and your spiritual life. If you can, all right, just write it all off as the common lot of anybody else who is not a Christian. No, you cannot disentangle this. It is all bound up together. It is going to have an effect upon you, one way or other, either to spiritual increase or spiritual loss. But oh, let us adjust. If the sufferings of Christ abound unto us, they are the sufferings *of Christ*. They may be soul sufferings, they may be in the physical realm, they may be both combined, but the Lord is sovereign in these sufferings, to great, beneficial, valuable ends.

Suffering and Love

I close by reminding You of this other word which the Apostle addressed to those Corinthians - "*I wrote unto you... not that ye should be made sorry, but that ye might know the love which I have more abundantly unto you*" (2 Cor. 2:4). You cannot have love without suffering. The two things go together; and mark you, your willingness to suffer, your attitude toward suffering, will prove your love for the Lord. Many people are not experiencing the sufferings of Christ because they have not enough love for His people. If you really have a heart love for a child of God, you are going to suffer for that child of God. If you have a heart love for the people of God, you are going to suffer for the people of God. If you have a heart love for a company of the Lord's people to which He has joined you, you are going to suffer for that company. If you have a heart love for your Lord, you are going to suffer with your Lord when you see His Name dishonoured and His interests reversed. Our love is

the measure of our suffering. If our suffering is little, it may be the great wrong is that our love is too small.