

## Not Worth Comparing

Romans 8:16–25<sup>1</sup>

### In Jars of Clay.

If you're familiar with the book of Acts, then you may remember that much of the narrative of the early church found there is bound up in the biographical details of the Apostle Paul. For instance, we're told in Acts chapter 16 that when Paul and Silas had cast a spirit of divination out of a slave girl, her owners became angry and arranged for the apostles to be arrested.

<sup>20</sup> And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, "These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. <sup>21</sup> They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice." Acts 16:20–21 ESV

Then,

<sup>22</sup> The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. <sup>23</sup> And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. <sup>24</sup> Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. Acts 16:22–24 ESV

Which, if you stop to think about it, is a high price to pay for setting a young woman free from a demonic spirit. Granted, they were disrupting her owners' ability to make a living too, but still... For the crime of setting this girl free by the power of the gospel, they are violently stripped of their clothing, beaten with rods, thrown in prison, and kept there with their feet fastened in the stocks (so, unable to move around and make themselves as comfortable as they could under the circumstances).

The implications of this are far worse than you even want to imagine, let alone have me describe. But these were relatively routine matters for the Apostles and other leaders in the early church. We see it throughout the book of Acts. We read of it in Paul's own words in 2 Corinthians 11, where he wrote:

<sup>23</sup> Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—

(says the Apostle, and author of our text this morning),

...with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death.

And just in case no one else was counting...

<sup>24</sup> Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one.

(the most severe corporal punishment allowed by Jewish law),

<sup>25</sup> Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea...

---

<sup>1</sup> All Scripture citations, unless otherwise noted, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).

<sup>26</sup> ...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 brothers; <sup>27</sup> in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

<sup>28</sup> And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. <sup>29</sup> Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? 2 Corinthians 11:23–29 ESV

Of course, even this was not ultimately about Paul. He had written earlier:

<sup>5</sup> For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. <sup>6</sup> For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. 2 Corinthians 4:5–6 ESV

And after that grand statement—"God has shone in our hearts"—he went on to say,

<sup>7</sup> But we have this treasure in jars of clay, **to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.**

So, let's not start thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought.

<sup>8</sup> We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; <sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; <sup>10</sup> always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

<sup>11</sup> For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. 2 Corinthians 4:7–11 ESV

See, we read Scripture, but sometimes I wonder if it makes much of an impression. We read that

<sup>7</sup> ...we have this treasure in jars of clay...

—and this for a purpose—

...to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us... <sup>11</sup> For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. 2 Corinthians 4:7–11 ESV

and then we look out the window on the 29<sup>th</sup> of March—in Canada, no less—and complain about the snow. "Why? Oh, why, is this happening?" By the way, it could always be worse, and 7 years ago it was. (One could almost say that the snow we received yesterday was not worth comparing with the snow that we had in March 2018...)

We might also be tempted to take that approach to suffering. "After all, it could always be worse," and it could—it really could. We could live in Myanmar and be caught in the middle of a civil war when the 7.7 magnitude earthquake hits, and suddenly, we (or those we love)

are buried under the rubble of collapsed buildings. It can always be worse, and for most of history, it has.

### The Reality of Suffering.

But that is not Paul's point—not in 2 Corinthians 4, or 11, and not in Romans 8. He is not attempting to give us a theology of general suffering so that we can feel really, really spiritual when things are not going our way. Nor is he telling us to just grin and bear it, keep calm and carry on and all that.

I mean, it's true. We *will* suffer, whether you are a Christian or not. That's a given. It's part of the fallen human condition. It's part of life in a world racked by sin. Everybody suffers at one time or another, and some, pretty much all the time. But there's a kind of suffering that's peculiar to those who want to follow Jesus, acknowledging Him as Lord. As Paul wrote to Timothy,

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, *all* who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted... 2 Timothy 3:12 ESV

Which doesn't leave a lot of wiggle room, at least not in a direction we would really want to go. Jesus Himself, also said,

<sup>13</sup> Do not be surprised, brothers, *that* the world hates you. 1 John 3:13 ESV

("that" the world hates you; not if). The apostle Peter too, suggested that we ought to be prepared for this. In 1 Peter, chapter 4, he wrote:

<sup>1</sup> Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking... 1 Peter 4:1 ESV

And some time ago now, we saw in Romans 5, that through Jesus,

<sup>3</sup> ...we rejoice in our sufferings...

not because we enjoy suffering for its own sake, but

...knowing that suffering produces endurance, <sup>4</sup> and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, <sup>5</sup> and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. Romans 5:3-5 ESV

That very same Holy Spirit who bears witness in the midst of all this that we are children of God,

<sup>17</sup> ...and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, **provided...**

(if, indeed)

...we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. Romans 8:17 ESV

### The Proof Is in the Perseverance.

I believe the point Paul is making here is that there are many who want to think of themselves as children of God—there are many who profess to be Christians; there are many who will say on that day, “Lord, Lord...”—there are

<sup>16</sup> ...the ones sown on rocky ground...

as Jesus described them in Mark, chapter 4,

...the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. <sup>17</sup> And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. Mark 4:16–17 ESV

So, the Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit, making us turn to God and cry, “Abba! Father!”, not only when all is well and things are right with the world, but also (and especially) during times of tribulation or persecution. That’s why James wrote:

<sup>13</sup> Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray... James 5:13 ESV

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him—let us—cry out to God, as did Jesus, who

<sup>7</sup> In the days of his flesh...offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.

<sup>8</sup> Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. Hebrews 5:7–8 ESV

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him—let us—look unto Jesus,

<sup>2</sup> ...the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Let us,

<sup>3</sup> Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that **[we]** may not grow weary or fainthearted.

For

<sup>4</sup> In **[our]** struggle against sin **[we]** have not yet resisted to the point of shedding **[our]** blood. Hebrews 12:2–4 ESV

So, is anyone suffering? Let him—let us—cry out to God, “Abba! Father!” Then, when we suffer with Him, standing firm in the faith and not falling away, we will have the assurance that we have been born again, not of corruptible seed, but through the living and abiding word of God. See, the proof is in the perseverance, because the only way we persevere is through Spirit of God who bears witness within us.

**I Cried Because I Had No Shoes.**

And what does this perseverance look like when we’re in the thick of it? Well, in Romans 8, verse 18, Paul wrote.

<sup>18</sup> For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing... Romans 8:18  
ESV

But not worth comparing with what—the sufferings that could be? the worst case scenario? Is he saying that the sufferings that we are experiencing here and now in the present time are not worth comparing with what our sufferings potentially could be if things really went from bad to worse in our culture and time? Well, then this passage would have to be written to us alone, and exclusive of all those people in the world who are enduring just about the worst that we (or they) can imagine.

It's like that old saying, "I cried because I had no shoes, and then I met a man who had no feet." But what about that guy? Who does he have to meet to feel better about having no feet? There's no end to it. There's always something worse, or at least the potential for it, and that can't be what Paul is writing about here.

But maybe he's saying that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the sufferings of others? For us that's probably true. Most of us haven't been beaten and left for dead even once. None of us have been through anything like what the Apostle Paul suffered. But here's the thing. This is Paul writing. This is Paul who endured all of those things we read about back at the beginning this morning. This is Paul, who wrote

<sup>11</sup> For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake... 2 Corinthians 4:11 ESV

which must be pretty much the epitome of what it means to suffer for the faith. So, what are we talking about here? Well, if we skip down just a few verses in 2 Corinthians, chapter 4, we read in 2 Corinthians 4, verses 16 and 17:

<sup>16</sup> ...Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. <sup>17</sup>  
For this **light momentary affliction** is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory  
beyond all comparison, 2 Corinthians 4:16–17 ESV

And did you catch it?

<sup>11</sup> ...we who live...

Paul wrote,

...are always being given over to death...

but it's OK, because it's

...for Jesus' sake... 2 Corinthians 4:11 ESV

That's why it's just "this light momentary affliction," no big deal in the end, because whatever suffering that we endure in this life, in Christ it's achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. And that's exactly why Paul wrote in our text from Romans chapter 8 (verse 18),

<sup>18</sup> For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. Romans 8:18 ESV

Other translations have it, “the glory that is to be revealed **in** us.” And that’s what these trials and tribulations are doing (that’s what God is doing in them, and through them). That’s what God is preparing for us, and what God is preparing us for. He is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.

### Looking Unto Jesus.

But what are we to do with this now? How are we to endure in the moment? How are we to persevere in the here and now, when the reward remains unseen for the time being. Well, there’s more to be said from Romans chapter 8 next Sunday, if the Lord is willing, but consider what the writer to the Hebrews said. Hebrews chapter 12, verse 1:

<sup>1</sup> Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, **and let us run...**

(What a beautiful metaphor for the Christian life!)

...let us run *with perseverance* the race marked out for us.

And where does that race lead? Where does it end? At the finish line, of course, so set your sights there. Verse 2:

<sup>2</sup> Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, 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. Hebrews 12:1–2 NIV84

How should we live then, as those who know that the sufferings of this present time are not even worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us and to us? Well, live for Jesus. Run to Jesus. Fix your eyes on Jesus, and run with patience whatever path God has marked out to get you from here to Him. And however long or short that race may be, do not lose heart. As Paul wrote, once again, in 2 Corinthians 4.

<sup>16</sup> Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. <sup>17</sup> For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup>

Corinthians 4:16–18 NIV84