SERVING THROUGH SUFFERING

2 Timothy 1:8

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2 Timothy 1:8

After an extensive tour of the United States, the well known German pastor and theologian Helmut Thielicke was asked what he saw as the greatest defect among American Christians. He replied, “They have an inadequate view of suffering” (cited by Philip Yancey, Where is God When it Hurts? [Zondervan, 1977], p. 15).

Thielicke was right. I’ve heard many times of Christian psychologists who encourage their clients to rage at God because of tragedies that they have gone through. I’ve heard of pastors and missionaries who have left their ministries and sometimes left the faith because of burnout or other hardships. I’ve seen many in the local church quit their ministries and sometimes drop out of church altogether, because they were criticized or ran into conflict with other believers. We have an inadequate view of suffering.

I confess at the outset that I am not qualified to preach on the subject of serving Christ through suffering. I have suffered very little in my service for Christ. Sure, I’ve been hit with criticism and verbal attacks. I’ve had people slander me and accuse me falsely and try to get me fired. But I’ve never had to go through what many of the Lord’s servants in China, India, or most of the Muslim countries go through. They suffer beatings, imprisonment, rejection by their families, privation, and death because of Christ.

In writing about the life of the great Baptist missionary to Burma, Adoniram Judson, Pastor John Piper states (http://www.desiringgod.org/library/biographies/03judson.html),

More and more I am persuaded from Scripture and from the history of missions that God’s design for the evangelization of the world and the consummation of his purposes includes the suffering of his ministers and missionaries. To put it more plainly and specifically, God designs that the suffering of his ministers and missionaries is one essential means in the joyful triumphant spread of the gospel among all the peoples of the world.
Piper goes on soberly to say that if we are faithful to God’s command to take the gospel to the remaining unreached peoples, some of us and some of our children will be killed in the process. But this is clearly God’s design, as the Bible and church history repeatedly demonstrate. In fact, God has predetermined a specific number of martyrs (see Rev. 6:10-11)!

Paul was in his final imprisonment, awaiting execution. Timothy, timid by nature, was not so sure that he wanted to follow in the great apostle’s footsteps if it meant imprisonment and martyrdom. That didn’t sound like a fun future! He may have been wondering if there might be a little safer, more pleasant line of work to get into. So Paul pleads with him not to be ashamed of the gospel or of Paul, the prisoner, but to join with him in suffering for the gospel. Paul mentions this in every chapter of this letter. In (2:3) he writes, “Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.” In 3:12, he re-emphasizes, “Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” Again (4:5) he exhorts Timothy to “endure hardship” in his ministry.

“Therefore” (1:8) points us back to 1:5-7: “Because you are saved, Timothy, and God has given you a spiritual gift to use in serving Him, therefore, join with me in suffering for the gospel.” Paul is making the point,

**When you serve Christ, be prepared to suffer for the gospel.**

There are five things to note in this verse:

1. **You must accept the reality of suffering up front.**

When I was in boot camp for the Coast Guard, a guy became the laughingstock of the whole camp because he arrived with his water skis and fishing pole! It seems that the recruiter had told him (correctly) that the boot camp was on an island in the Oakland harbor. And, the recruiter was technically correct in telling this guy that you could water ski and fish there (as long as you understood the word you in the broadest sense, meaning, “a person” theoretically could do these things).

What the recruiter failed to tell this naïve recruit was that the first day of boot camp, they issued your uniform and made you take all of your civilian clothes, including your underwear, and ship them back home. The shipment included your comb, shampoo,
and all personal toiletries, except for a razor and shaving cream. You wouldn’t need your comb and shampoo after they gave you the boot camp haircut, which came next, because you would have no hair! Also, they took away all privileges. There were no TV sets, but there was one radio and they posted the front page of a newspaper on a bulletin board. But the catch was, you had to earn the privilege to have the radio on or to read that front page.

They could wake you up in the middle of the night and make you carry all of the bunk beds from the second floor down to the ground outside. Then you had to strip the floor of old wax and re-wax and polish it before carrying your bunks back, being careful not to mar your new wax job! Or, if they chose, they could make you go out and run or march in the middle of the night for a couple of hours. If you were lucky, you might get back to bed for an hour before they got you up at 5 a.m. for the day. And woe to you if you dozed off during the boring classes!

They were trying to prepare us for real battle or rescue situations, where you could be called out in the night in extreme conditions and you had to work harmoniously as a team. They knew that we would not be adequately prepared if we spent our time waterskiing or fishing or lounging around reading the newspaper. We needed to be ready to accept danger and hardship up front so that when it hit, we would not run from our duty.

Not only this verse, but also the entire Bible shows that serving God engages you in combat with the evil enemy, the devil, and that God does not promise to keep you from all suffering in the battle. Jesus sent out the disciples as sheep among wolves, warning that they would be persecuted because of the gospel (Matt. 10:16-17; Luke 21:12-19). Paul wrote (Rom. 8:36-36), “Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, ‘For Your sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’” The implication is that God’s people have to endure those sorts of trials.

Hebrews 11:35b-38 tells of men of faith who “were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection; and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in
two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.” Where did we ever get the idea that if we serve Jesus Christ, he will spare us from suffering and hardship?

So before you think, “It will be fun to serve the Lord,” consider the cost. You’re being deployed into enemy territory. There will be attacks and setbacks and even friendly fire from your own troops! You’ve got to accept the reality of suffering up front before you get involved in serving. Otherwise, you’re going to be rather shocked when they send your water skis and fishing pole home!

2. Be prepared to endure the shame of the cross.

“Do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord....” The testimony of our Lord is the message of the Savior who died on a shameful Roman cross. As Paul wrote (1 Cor. 1:18), “For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.” A few verses later (1:22-23) he adds, “For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness....”

Although the Jews did not practice crucifixion, sometimes they would hang a dead body on a stake or a tree as a public object lesson of shame (Josh. 10:26; 1 Sam. 31:10; 2 Sam. 21:1-9). They considered such men accursed by God (Deut. 21:22-23; Gal. 3:13).

The Romans probably imported the practice of crucifying live victims from the Persians. The cross in the first century world was an abominable horror. Roman citizens, except in rare cases, were exempt from it. It was reserved for slaves, robbers, assassins, or rebellious provincials. Sometimes the Romans would crucify thousands in mass executions, leaving their bodies to rot as a warning to others not to rebel Both the Romans and the Jews viewed crucifixion as so shameful and degrading that it shouldn’t even be mentioned (Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible [Zondervan], 1:1038, 1041).

Today we have seeker churches that are into marketing the gospel by making the message more acceptable to unbelievers. They downplay sin and judgment, because those aren’t popular
among their target audiences. They play up how Jesus can help you reach your full potential, or how He can give you a happier family life. But the gospel isn’t about helping you fulfill your dreams for happiness and success. The testimony of our Lord is a testimony of a crucified Savior. He died to rescue sinners from the awful eternal judgment that they deserve. While that message may not “sell” in today’s self-focused culture, that is our only message.

Pastor John MacArthur has observed that God couldn’t have created a worse way to market the gospel than by a crucified Savior. But if you eliminate or minimize the cross to make the gospel more marketable, you eliminate the gospel. That simple message of the crucified Savior is just as powerful to convert an intellectual at the university as it is to save a primitive tribesman in the jungle. Rather than being ashamed of the cross, Paul gloried in it (Gal. 6:14). So he is calling Timothy (and us) not to be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, which is the message of the cross. Proclaim it without compromise.

But, why would anyone choose to do something that inevitably leads to shame or suffering?

3. Be willing to suffer because the Lord and the gospel are worth suffering for.

If you’re going to choose hardship or suffering, at least choose to suffer for a worthy cause. You’ll lose all your money and possessions at death. But what could be more worthy than the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior? Paul tells Timothy not to be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord and appeals to him, “join with me in suffering for the gospel.” When we suffer for the gospel, we’re suffering to take the greatest news in human history to those who are perishing, so that they can have eternal life!

Jesus (Matt. 13:44) told the parable of the man who found a treasure hidden in a field. From joy over it, he went and sold all that he had to buy that field. Christ and the gospel are that treasure! He told a similar parable (Matt. 13:45-46) about the merchant who found a pearl of great value and he sold all that he had to buy it. Jesus and the gospel are that pearl of great price. If you’ve found eternal life in Him, you’ve got everything that you need for time and eternity. Christ and the gospel are worth suffering for!
4. Be willing to suffer because of the caliber of men like Paul—they’re worth joining in the cause.

The apostle Paul is one of the most remarkable men in history. Paul’s letters that God saw fit to put into our New Testament reveal the heart of this man, who counted everything else as rubbish so that he could know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings (Phil. 3:8-10). In addition to Paul, when you serve Jesus Christ you are joining ranks with Peter and John and the other apostles, and with the long line of faithful saints who have handed the torch down to our day. It is the greatest cause in the history of the world, because we know that one day soon, the kingdom of this world will “become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever” (Rev. 11:15).

But back to reality: here’s Paul, chained in a dark Roman dungeon, being criticized and attacked, even by his fellow Christians. Almost everyone has abandoned the frail old man. How can he maintain any hope in this gloomy situation?

I think one key is in his comment, “me His prisoner.” It was Caesar’s government that had arrested Paul. Certainly he was Caesar’s prisoner! No, from Paul’s perspective, he was the prisoner of the Lord, the King of kings, the sovereign of the universe. One key to enduring any criticism or suffering that you encounter in serving the Lord is to remember that He is sovereign over it. He has a purpose in allowing people to do wrong things to His servants.

If you serve people, you will be their prisoner if they mistreat you. But if you serve the sovereign God, then you are His prisoner. Adoniram Judson, who suffered incredible trials in taking the gospel to Burma, said, “If I had not felt certain that every additional trial was ordered by infinite love and mercy, I could not have survived my accumulated sufferings” (in John Piper, from “Giants of the Missionary Trail” [Scripture Press Foundation, 1954], p. 73).

But there is another factor in how Paul could endure such trials with hope in the Lord:

5. The strength to suffer comes from the power of God.

“Join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God.” Paul had learned to rely on God’s power to endure
trials. As he describes in 2 Corinthians 12, God had sent him a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to keep him from exalting himself after his heavenly vision. Some think that it was an illness, perhaps a disease of the eyes. Others have suggested that the thorn was the leader of the Judaizers, who followed Paul everywhere that he went, perverting the gospel of grace that he preached.

But whatever it was, it was a severe trial and Paul entreated the Lord three times to remove it. The Lord’s answer was (2 Cor. 12:9), “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” It is in our weakness that God’s strength is perfected in us and displayed to others. It is when you are overwhelmed by trials, setbacks, disappointments, and impossible situations in your service for the Lord that you’re forced to cast yourself on His power in ways that you’ve never done before. When you suffer in serving the Lord, endure by the power of Almighty God.

Conclusion

Whenever I am tempted to feel sorry for any difficulties that I have to endure in ministry, my mind goes back to a great hero of mine, Adoniram Judson. Born in 1788, and converted in his early twenties, Judson and his new bride Ann sailed in 1812 with a group of the first missionaries to go out from American soil. After a difficult four-month voyage, they arrived in India only to hear very discouraging reports about Burma, plus to learn that they could not stay in India. They spent the next year sailing from India to Mauritius (off the coast of South Africa) and back, to avoid deportation. Finally, against all advice, they managed to get aboard a ship going to Burma. En route, Ann gave birth to a stillborn baby and almost died herself.

They finally arrived in Rangoon, Burma, a filthy, fly-infested town, and began the arduous task of learning Burmese. They found the Burmese people to be committed to Buddhism and totally uninterested in and opposed to Christianity. The only other English-speaking couple in Rangoon left, so the Judsons were alone as they struggled with the language and the mission. The birth of a son brightened their lives, but at eight months, he grew ill. With no doctors or medicine in Rangoon, the baby died. They buried him in their yard and continued with the work through their tears.
After six years, they finally baptized their first Burmese convert. A handful more trickled in over the next few years. Then, in 1824, the British went to war against the Burmese. The Judsons were in the capital city, Ava, and Adoniram was imprisoned, falsely accused of being a British spy.

His arrest was by a “Spotted Face,” a criminal whose face bore a spot tattoo on each cheek. Some of these vicious men had the name of their crime branded into their foreheads or chests. The ears and/or noses of some had been cut off. Some had only one eye. They delighted to inflict similar tortures on their captives. To arrest a man, they slipped a small, hard cord behind the back and around a man’s arms, just above the elbow. They could yank this cord so tight that it often dislocated the arms, it could cut off the breath, and could even make blood spurt from the nose and mouth of the prisoner. After hauling Judson to the prison, they secured his feet with three sets of iron fetters that cut into his ankles.

The prison was a sweltering bamboo room, with an overwhelming stench. There were no windows, but a little light filtered through the cracks. At night, the prison ruler, with “murderer” tattooed on his chest, who insisted on being called Father, would come in with an assistant. They slid a long bamboo pole through the fetters on each man’s legs and hoisted it up with a block and tackle until only the prisoner’s shoulders and heads rested on the floor. They left them suspended in this position all night, while the rats ran around them on the filthy floor.

Ann was pregnant, but had to walk two miles each way to bring him food each day. After 17 months of this terrible torture, including a move to a farther location, where he had to walk barefoot over sharp, hot rocks and nearly died, Judson was released. The Burmese government needed his translation skills to negotiate with the British. Eleven months later, Ann, who had delivered their third child during Adoniram’s imprisonment, died. Six months after that, their little daughter died.

For a period of time, Judson almost went crazy. He moved out into the tiger-infested jungle and lived as a recluse. It took him almost three years to recover and regain the right perspective. But even during those difficult years, he continued working on his translation of the Bible and on some evangelistic materials. It took
him 21 years from his arrival in Burma to complete the translation of the Bible, plus six more years to revise it.

Eight years after Ann’s death, he married Sarah Boardman, a widow of another missionary. They had eight children, five of whom survived childhood. Eleven years later, Sarah died as the Judsons sailed to America. After 33 years in Burma with no furlough, Adoniram arrived in America. While there, he met and married a young woman, Emily Chubbuck, who was a famous writer. She was 29, he was 57. She went back to Burma with him and they had four happy years together before Judson died at age 61. She returned to America and died at age 37 of tuberculosis.

I haven’t begun to describe many of the other hardships that he and his wives and children had to endure over the years. He left behind a Burmese Bible, a Burmese-English dictionary, and a small number of Burmese Christians. Today in Burma (Myanmar), according to Operation World (Patrick Johnstone & Jason Mandryk, 21st Century Edition, p. 462), there are over 3,700 Baptist churches with a total membership of over 600,000, plus many other evangelical churches. The Burmese church today, although under frequent persecution, sends out many missionaries of their own.

I would like to think that the Lord has Adoniram Judson heading up the official “Welcome to Heaven committee” when Burmese believers die. After reading about what Judson endured to take the gospel to Burma, how can I complain when I suffer a little criticism or hardship in my service for the Lord? Read his life and the lives of other missionaries for yourself and join with Paul in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God.
Application Questions

1. Why are we generally so fragile when it comes to any sort of criticism or hardship in serving the Lord? Would persecution be good for the American church?

2. Why is the cross an offense? Why can’t we soften the difficult parts of the gospel in order to win people to Christ?

3. How does an understanding of God’s sovereignty help us to endure hardship in the Christian life?

4. Which is more difficult to endure: persecution from without or attacks from within the church? Why?

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