

Suffering With Christ
Romans 8, 2 Corinthians 1, Colossians 1

Not long ago, Marilyn said to me, “almost every household in our church has painful troubles. We pray about them, but God is in no hurry to take these away.” Most of our households have ongoing distress, sometimes severe. And God often lets these carry on. Not always, but often. To help us understand this, today we’ll look at “suffering with Christ.”

1 Suffering with Christ – Four Texts in Paul

Let’s begin with this phrase: “suffering with Christ.” What does that mean, to suffer with Christ? Today we will learn more about what that means.

Romans 8:17 *We are heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with him in order that we may be glorified with him.* Suffer with Christ.

2 Corinthians 1:5 *For just as the sufferings of Christ overflow to us, so also through Christ his comfort overflows to us.* The sufferings of Christ overflow to us.

Philippians 3:10 *I want to know Christ, to know the power of his resurrection and to share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.* To share in his suffering, to know the fellowship of his suffering.

Colossians 1:24 *I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.* This is a remarkable line: “in my flesh I fill up the lack of Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, the church.” But there’s another side to suffering with Christ...

2 Christ Suffers with Us – Matthew 25; Acts 9

Suffering with Christ begins with Christ suffering with us. Two Scriptures make this clear.

Matthew 25:34–36 - *Then the King will say to those on his right ... “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.”*

Let’s give these lines full value. Jesus does not just sympathize with us in our distress, and he’s not just near us. He actually experiences just what we experience. **He** is sick, **he** is homeless, **he** is thirsty, **he** is without clothes. When any of these things happen to any of the Lord’s brothers and sisters, even the least of them, these things actually happen to Jesus. Let’s imagine that Jesus means that just the way he says it. We can’t understand this Scripture unless we first imagine it.

Acts 9:4–5 Saul fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

Same as Matthew 25. Christ suffers with us. This includes all our troubles, not just persecutions. Matthew 25 was clear. Hungry and thirsty and sick and needing clothes happen to everyone.

Our Lord Jesus still suffers, and he is suffering a lot. Jesus right now experiences the same pain or distress as every believer who is in pain or distress. He is not suffering now to reconcile us to God and bring us eternal life. The suffering that brought us life is finished and complete. Nevertheless, he still experiences all our troubles as happening directly to him.

3 We are Members of his Body – Romans 12:4–5; 1 Corinthians 6:15; Eph 3:6; 4:25; 5:30.

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? 1 Cor 6:15

Jesus experiences our suffering because we are members of his body. Here's something important about the Greek word for “member.” It was only used for body parts. They did not use “member” for “choir members” or “team members” or “committee members.” “Member” meant a hand or a foot or an eye or a heart or stomach or a kidney or a leg or an arm.

This is why Christ suffers with us. We are now his physical body. Here's an illustration. I have pliers in my pocket. I'm taking these pliers, and I'm squeezing the end of my thumb in the pliers. I'm squeezing hard enough that it hurts. Not too bad, but hard enough to be uncomfortable. Suppose I asked one of the men here to come up and clamp down on my thumb as hard as they can for just one second. I'm not going to, but imagine that. I would howl. You'd hear a sound of distress out of me.

You might say, “Ed, it was just one fingertip. Nine of your fingers are fine, arms and legs and feet are fine. Just one fingertip hurts? What's the problem?” Well, that's how body parts work. You could say, “Ed, it is just one finger tip, it is not you.” True, it is just one finger tip. But when someone clamped hard on that finger, I'd be in distress. I would be in distress because of one fingertip. You and I are Christ's fingers, and sometimes we have the pliers on us.

Can you see why Jesus would say, “I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was naked, I was sick, I was in prison”? Can you see why Jesus would say, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *me*? I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

You and I experience the world with our bodies. Christ has a physical body on earth, called the church. His physical body on earth has many members. The world experiences Christ mostly through his body, the church. And Christ, for his part, experiences the world mostly through his physical body with many members, which is the church. We need to assume that Christ is as connected to one each of us, as members of his body, as we are connected to each one of the members of our own physical body.

4 Suffering with Christ is Essential – Romans 8:17; Acts 14:21–22

My brothers and sisters, we must suffer. It is required. Here's Romans 8:17 again, which we read earlier: *We are heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with him in order that we may be glorified with him.*

We do want to inherit along with Christ. We want to be glorified along with Christ. Well, then we need to suffer with him. Christ will inherit everything, and be glorified, because he suffered. If we want to inherit along with him and be glorified with him, we also must suffer with him.

This is Paul and Barnabas at the end of their first missionary journey – Acts 14:21–22 *Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said. Luke give us the most important line in their own words: They said, We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.*

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. And again, Every branch that bears fruit he prunes so that it will bear more fruit.

Following Jesus means we deny our claim to a trouble-free life. When we came to Jesus, we walked away from that claim. We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.

5 All Suffering is Suffering with Christ – Romans 8:17-24a

We read Romans 8:17 earlier. I'll read it again, and then read v 18 as well. *Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that the sufferings of this present age are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.*

Did you catch what Paul just did? In v17, he said we shared Christ's sufferings, and then in v18 he explains this, but he calls them "the sufferings of this present age." Suffering with Christ, and the sufferings of this present age, are the same sufferings. This is important!

I've read some narrow descriptions of which sufferings are suffering with Christ, but that does not come from the New Testament. Believers endure all the sufferings of this age, and by doing that we share the sufferings of Christ, for we are members of his body.

I will not read the rest, but if I did you would see that the sufferings of this age that we endure are the same as the sufferings of all creation. We "share in the sufferings of Christ." Those are the same as the "sufferings of the present age," and *those* are the same as "the sufferings of all creation," in bondage to futility and decay. We are a part of creation, so we are in the same state. In that way we share in Christ's sufferings so that we can be glorified with him.

All our suffering is suffering with Christ, including what comes from our own weaknesses and mistakes, because weaknesses and mistakes are at the core of the futility of this present age. We join all creation in this. We are no longer in bondage to the authority of darkness, because of Christ's first sufferings. But we still are part of creation in its bondage to decay and futility.

In the Old Testament, God punished people for their sins, but in the New Testament, that has almost completely disappeared. There are a couple of stories, but on the whole that is almost never the explanation for suffering. But in the New Testament, the central explanation for suffering is that Christ suffered, so we suffer too.

6 Suffering Makes us Like God: We can Comfort Others – 2 Corinthians 1:3-5

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.

God is the Father of compassions and the God of all comfort, who comforts us. That's where this begins. He comforts us in all our troubles, *so that we can pass that comfort on!* When believers have been in big distress due to fear or illness or tragedy of some kind, they have much more ability to be sympathetic and encouraging. God prizes that ability.

Our God invented compassion and comfort. There was not any until it came out of him. He takes us through dark days, and he finds ways to keep us going, so that when we see others going through dark days, we can be good to them and help them and encourage them. In that way, God has made us like him. He comforts those in trouble, and now we can too. There is a lot of this going on in this church. You people know all about this.

In 2 Corinthians 4:12, Paul puts this more bluntly. *So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.* What a line! Sufferings take a toll on us, and we will eventually die. Has it ever occurred to you that you being faithful to God in your suffering actually brings life to the believers around you? *So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.* We are members of Christ's body. His sufferings bring life. Suffering with Christ brings life to others.

Notice again, like Romans 8, that all troubles are sharing abundantly in the suffering of Christ. God comforts us, Paul says, in *all our troubles*, so we can comfort those *in any trouble*. This is not ambiguous. And in the next sentence he calls this "sharing abundantly in the sufferings of Christ." When believers have all troubles, any troubles, they are "sufferings of Christ."

7 The Fellowship of Christ's Sufferings – Philippians 3:10–11

I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

My first marriage was difficult and painful, and it came apart. My wife and I were separated and then divorced. Pain, disappointment. This happened in the early years of my teaching. It's not news now, but it was for a while. And during those years, a small but steady stream of believers came to my office to tell me their story.

In one way or another their story was the same. They came to me because I would understand how this felt without them having to spell it out to me. They were right; I did. It is still true that when someone tells me their marriage ended in divorce, there is a bond of understanding between us right away, without either of us saying any more. Many of you have the same kind of story, when another believer goes through the same thing as you have been through.

Suffering gives us that with Christ, and Paul wanted that fellowship with Christ. Sometimes our distress is too intense, we don't think we can take it any more. Something has to change; we can't go on. We are losing it. It has to stop! (But sometimes it doesn't.) Someday you and Christ will look at each other, and neither of you will have to explain to the other what that is like, because you both already know.

Christ wants that with us. He can't make that happen once we're on the new earth. If it's going to happen at all, it has to happen now. So sometimes it gets pretty raw. Paul wanted that with Christ. Paul wanted to experience what happened to Christ, so that he and Christ would have that bond. The fellowship of his sufferings.

I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

8 Suffering Produces what God Prizes – Romans 5:3–5; James 1:2–4; 1 Peter 1:3–7

We won't read these three texts. They all say much the same thing. They come from Paul, James, and Peter, which means this was standard teaching in the all the New Testament churches.

Suffering changes us, particularly when it lasts for a while. It produces character qualities that God treasures. For our part, all we need to do is keep trusting in God, keep walking with God.

This produces endurance, and character, and maturity, and completeness. Above all, God loves faith that has been tested. The good life, my brothers and sisters, does not test our faith. God loves faith that's been tested and proven.

In our suffering, we don't experience this. We feel desperate, weak, struggling, abandoned by God. All of that happened to Jesus, too. Let's just keep putting our life in God's hands, and be faithful to him as we are able. That's what it takes from us. These sections, from Paul and James and Peter, assume that there is no other way for God to bring out the best of us.

And both James and Peter deliberately say all kinds of suffering. The suffering we're talking about today is all the sufferings of this present age. So find a way to keep the faith. In long troubles that is not easy. For our part, keep the faith. That's all God needs us to do so he can produce what he prizes.

9 Why does Christ still Suffer? To bring the Final Restoration.

Christ still suffers severely. Why is that? Here's a simple explanation. Christ's first suffering triggered the beginning of the new age. Christ suffers now, and we suffer with him, to trigger the end of the old age, and the final restoration of all things. Because we are physical members of his second physical body, our accumulated sufferings are part of what will end the old age and bring final restoration.

Christ's sufferings are always to bring atonement, to bring deliverance, to bring renewal. The sufferings of Christ that we read about in the Gospels began the new age. We now have the Holy Spirit and adoption and eternal life. Christ's first sufferings did that, and that is complete. If Christ is still suffering, and he is, then some other important renewal or reconciliation still needs to happen.

The new age has begun, but the old age is has not ended. We still have all the sufferings of this present age. Creation itself is still subject to bondage to decay. Creation groans, and we who have the Holy Spirit groan with it. There are all kinds of evil and unpleasantness on this earth. Christ's first suffering triggered the beginning of the new age. Christ suffers now, and we suffer with him, to trigger the end of the old age, and the final restoration of all things.

10 Summary

Let's summarize. We suffer with Christ, we share his suffering. Christ suffers with us. What happens to us happens to him. That is because we are the members of his physical body. We are his second physical body. Suffering is essential for us. There is no other way into the kingdom. All suffering is suffering with Christ, including those coming from our mistakes and weaknesses. God comforts us in our suffering so that we will be able to comfort others when they suffer. Because we suffer, we can bring life to others. Our suffering creates a bond with Christ himself, because we go through very difficult times, and so did he. We understand each other. Suffering and keeping the faith changes us. It gives us the kind of character and maturity that God prizes, and that he cannot get any other way. Amen.

PRAYER: Father, thank you for the Bible that helps us understand our troubles. Thank you for all the encouragement that these Scriptures bring us. And now, strengthen us with all the power that comes from your glorious might, so that we will endure everything with patience. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and into Christ's perseverance. May the Lord of peace give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.