

Fellowship in His Sufferings

More often than not when a person comes to Christ they have a vision of a joyful carefree existence. After all their sin has been forgiven and God's mercies are new every morning. They have entered into the presence of God in a deeper and meaningful way. But "the Way" as first century Christians soon found out was not always a blissful experience. For some it was rather painful if not life threatening. What was it that drew people to "the Way" that included times of deep sorrow and suffering? And why is it that God's church prospers most in times of severe persecution?

In the beginning of his epistle James instructs us to count it all joy when we encounter trial. And knowing that his admonition would cause some to question his logic in making this statement, he briefly explains but then refers us to a higher source of wisdom.

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. (James 1:2-5 NKJV)

In other words all suffering has got to pass through the hands of our loving heavenly Father, so in spite of our lack of understanding, there is a reason. I am reading an interesting book, recommended by a friend, called "The Holy Spirit's Biography of Jesus Christ" by Austin Sparks. Early on Sparks establishes the point that this biography is not written on parchment, but on the hearts of believers! Listen to what he says about suffering:

"Sometimes we cannot understand what the Lord is doing with us! **We cannot see the meaning of an experience, but if we are really in the hands of the Holy Spirit, our experiences are going to lead us on to know the Lord better.** Therefore we must not reject our experiences; we must not think of them as unnecessary, we must not rebel against them, we must not think that they have no meaning, but **we must take every experience into the presence of the Lord and say: 'Now, Lord, You must teach me what You mean by letting me have this experience.'** That is the foundation of this ministry: learning Christ, but not just in our heads. You may have your heads and your notebooks full of information this week, but it has to go down deeper. The New Testament speaks about "the eyes of your heart" (Ephesians 1:18).

T. Austin-Sparks (2011-02-13T11:00:00+00:00). The Holy Spirit's Biography of Christ (Kindle Locations 81-82). Austin-Sparks.Net. Kindle Edition.

God's original intent in creating man was to walk in relationship with him. In spite of Adam's fall and the consequences of that sinful act, God's intention is still the same. So if we could learn all that we need to know about God on the mountaintop that would be wonderful! Unfortunately that is not the case. When Jesus entered into the world of humanity He entered into a world that was hurting. And as His ambassadors we are called to live in that same world and minister to others as He did. Miles Stanford puts it this way:

We want fellowship with the Lord Jesus in His peace and joy, and naturally fear and seek to avoid suffering. However, **it is in the fellowship of His sufferings that we partake of His peace and joy.**

“The Lord has a wonderful way of bringing us into the fellowship of His sufferings, even when everything outside looks prosperous. Sometimes the most apparently prosperous lives have the deepest sufferings at the back of them. **The Lord must one way or another teach us fellowship with suffering, or we cannot be of much use.** We dwell much upon the side of being filled with joy, but let us not forget there are broken hearts all round us, and if we are to be channels of divine comfort to them, we must learn something of the fellowship of His sufferings in our own experience.” “We shall err if we think that life in the Sanctuary, hidden with Christ in God, means freedom from suffering, sorrow, and trial. Rather will the soul be strengthened inwardly to be trusted more and more with the ‘fellowship of His sufferings, becoming conformed unto His death’ (Phil. 3:10).” **“Our Father can advance His children into conformity to the image of His Son, more by suffering in one day, than in many years of ease from trial.”**

“See how we call those who thus endured happy! You have heard how patiently Job endured and have seen how the Lord finally blessed him, because the Lord is tenderhearted and merciful” (James 5:11 Wms.).

Stanford, M. J. (2002). Complete Works of Miles J. Stanford. Galaxie Software.

The Apostle Paul who had the opportunity to live a prosperous life as a Pharisee and Roman citizen chose to walk away from all of that in order to enter into a deeper fellowship with his Lord Jesus Christ. In fact he considered all that the world held dear to be rubbish or even dung compared to the joy of knowing God through Jesus Christ: ***“But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death,”*** (Philippians 3:7-10 NKJV)

I had to remind myself this week that although I am ultimately I am going one day to live with Jesus, how I respond to adversity in this lifetime matters. Paul was addressing believers when he said: ***“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.”*** (2 Corinthians 5:10 NKJV)

So I will end with these words of encouragement and hope from God’s Word : ***“The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs-- heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.”*** (Romans 8:16-18 NKJV)

Jim Freed