

The Gospel and Suffering

Certain flavors simply go together, despite their seemingly contrasting flavor profiles. I remember moving to the United States as an early teen and being introduced to my first peanut butter and jelly sandwich. To me, the thought of mixing the flavors of peanuts and strawberries was entirely absurd, even repulsive. Similarly, a few years ago someone shared a unique hot dog recipe with me. Have you ever been offered a “sriracha dog” at a cookout or backyard barbecue? The hot dog is placed inside a bun with peanut butter, covered with sweet pickle relish, and drizzled with sriracha sauce. Sounds a little questionable, doesn’t it? Yet, surprisingly the distinct flavors of each of the ingredients complement each other as if by design.

This is true of the gospel and suffering also. Think about it. At first glance the gospel and suffering seem to be entirely antithetical. Doesn’t it sound odd when you rephrase these two terms with “good news and suffering”? Yet their useful association is exactly what the New Testament constantly communicates to its readers. **The gospel and suffering are tantamount. They go together.** The early church was intimately acquainted with this reality.

Let’s consider one particular example that we find in the book of Acts during the birth of the church. Prior to this event, the disciples were indwelt and empowered by the Holy Spirit enabling them to do miraculous signs and to share the story of the resurrected Christ through languages (*tongues*) previously unfamiliar to them. The message of the good news - shared through Peter, the apostles, and many other disciples - spread like wildfire through Jerusalem. And while many - thousands, in fact - accepted the gospel, the message accompanied by supernatural acts caused astonishment and turmoil among the religious elite. They questioned Peter and John and ordered them to refrain from speaking in the name of Jesus. Even so, the ministry and message of the early church continued to grow in number (Acts 5:12-16). This kindled the jealousy of the religious and angered the religious leaders once again. This time they arrested the apostles and interrogated them a second time. Peter’s reply to the allegations and the apostles’ response to their subsequent mistreatment clearly establishes the obvious link between the gospel and suffering in Acts 5:29-34; 40-42.

... Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give

repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.” When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while... and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. Then **they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.**

There is a scarlet thread that runs from a godly gospel life to an encounter with suffering, ultimately culminating in a response of joy and praise! Philippians 1:29-30 establishes and confirms the same connection between the gospel and suffering:

For **it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake**, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Paul reminds his dear persecuted brothers and sisters in Philippi that “it has been granted” to them to believe and suffer for the glory of their Savior (Phil 1:29). Even though it might be hard to initially harmonize the good news and suffering, the two are nevertheless gifts that function as God’s shaping anvil and refining crucible (Rom 5:1-5).

As a disciple of Jesus, suffering is part of following in the Master’s footsteps (Jn 15:18-19). So, do not be afraid of suffering. Be of good courage. Make sure you are a student of the Bible and a lover of its Author. He is wise, loving, and purposeful. It is also good to know that you and I are not alone. God is present and has given us other believers, so we might comfort each other (2 Cor 1:4) and bear one another’s burdens (Gal 6:2). Finally, rejoice (Phil 4:4)! We have a message that sings in suffering (Acts 16:25-30). May the gospel ring loud and clear even in the darkest of times.

Romans 5:1-5 (ESV) - “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him **we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that**

suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 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."