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**Paul the Apostle: Overcoming evil with good**

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Introduction

All of us at a certain point in our lives have experienced suffering in various ways. Suffering can exist in all aspects of life including the physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual. As part of the physical we suffer when we fall, break an arm, or when ending up with just a little cut. There is emotional suffering in distress, worries, depression, and in disappointment.

Our spirit also suffers along with the other aspects of life if we are sensitive to assimilate and to process the feelings that interpret information as suffering. We might feel spiritual suffering when our lives do not attain the levels of spirituality we hope to reach or if our spirit is not at rest.

After we consider all of the above, we may agree that suffering also relates to pain. Not many of us like to experience pain and try to avoid it if possible because we may perceive it as something bad. However, we may be surprised to hear that pain is not always bad. The experience of having pain helps us to pay attention to the need of caring about something.

For example, if we have been sitting or standing in the same position, the feeling of pain will encourage us to change our position. The benefit of being emotionally distressed is that it will teach us to understand those who suffer emotionally, or to find help for ourselves or for others when needed. The actuality of suffering and pain offers opportunities to achieve good out of uncomfortable experiences.

Paul, the Apostle, was familiar with the various aspects of suffering and with the attitude of making something good out of it. After Paul became a Christian, his state of life also changed from that of persecutor to one who was persecuted. His suffering was not simply a philosophical or theoretical concern: suffering was a frequent, even daily, reality in his life. Paul talks about affliction in virtually all his letters to interpret human life and the gospel he understood of being capable to empower humanity. With this language he created a textual world in which suffering persists and weakness appears as part of human life.

Paul's epistles and the book of Acts mention many forms of physical suffering covering 1) physical abuse, 2) perils and plots, 3) imprisonments, and 4) bodily illness.

The list of physical abuse that Paul endures is indeed extensive. In the Second Letter to the Corinthians, he said, "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardship, persecutions, and calamities." Other examples include being beaten

with rods, being stoned, and being shipwrecked. In addition, sleepless nights, without food, in cold weather, in hunger and thirst, often without food, with countless beatings, and often near death.

Another element of physical suffering experienced by Paul is that of imprisonment: “far more imprisonments,” Paul says in II Corinthians 11:23. He speaks of his own imprisonment or of being a prisoner in a number of places in his epistles. Acts tells at least four imprisonments of Paul: at Philippi (Acts 16:23f), Jerusalem (22:29-23:10), Caesarea, and Rome (28:16).

Apart from the physical abuse which he suffered, we could mention signs of Paul’s physical illness. Some have pointed to an eye disease. Others have suggested malaria or epilepsy. For example when he says, “you know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first; and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. What has become of the satisfaction you felt? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and give them to me” (Gal. 4:13-15). The “you know” which begins verse 13 shows that Paul’s condition was common knowledge to the Galatians.

Paul also expresses mental and emotional suffering. He wrote, “And I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling (I Cor. 2:3). For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest but we were afflicted at every turn.” Paul’s mental and emotional suffering overlaps in many places of Spiritual Suffering, nevertheless, it can be identified more specifically under the following headings: 1) rejection by unbelievers, 2) affliction by false believers and unbelievers, and 3) grief over believers and fellow workers.

Paul’s message was not always received with open arms. Paul speaks of declaring the gospel to the Thessalonians “in the face of great opposition” (Thess. 2:2). The existence of “many adversaries.” He asks the Thessalonians to pray for him and those working with him, to be delivered from wicked and evil persons; for not all have faith” (II Thess. 3:2). Opposition to the faith chased Paul and his companions from one town to the next, sometimes involving physical violence, beatings, stoning, imprisonments, and persecution of various kinds.

Another aspect of Paul’s mental and emotional suffering came from the pain, anguish, and harm inflicted upon him by those who supposedly were fellow believers or from friends who deserted him in times of need. To the Philippians, Paul describes the situation in the city of his imprisonment as follows, “some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel; the former claim Christ out of partisanship, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment” (Phil. 1:15-17). The gospel is evident of the pain and deep sense of anguish which Paul feels when professed believers turn against him.

Paul had to suffer the fact that he was one of the most hated men in the ancient world. It was natural for Jews to think of him as a traitor. According to the Jews, Paul had betrayed their Law and their national identity. Many Jews turned against Paul when he declared that Christ assigned him as an apostle for the Gentiles.

Another aspect of mental and emotional suffering experienced by Paul was that of distress over the spiritual condition of the believers in the various churches he had founded and the grief over the physical condition of his fellow workers. Here again we overlap with the category of spiritual suffering. Nevertheless, a few examples will be satisfactory to show the relevance to the present category as well.

Paul also endured spiritual suffering in his epistles. We can see them as follows: 1) Christian labors, 2) divine compulsion, 3) satanic hindrances, 4) bodily subjection, 5) unceasing anguish for the Jews, 6) daily concern for the churches, and 7) fear of failure in his mission.

Not only is there a sense of exhausting labor in Paul's work for the Lord, but a sense of divine compulsion is evident. In a passage where Paul is speaking about the willingness of an apostle to renounce his rights for the sake of the gospel (I Cor. 9:1-27), Paul says, "For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission" (I Cor. 9:16f). Preaching the gospel is a necessity from which Paul cannot withdraw because God has commissioned him to do this (Rom. 1:1), and Christ Jesus has made Paul his own (Phil. 3:12).

Paul was aware that opposition to the gospel message, which he proclaimed, came not only or even primarily from human forces, but rather from spiritual forces. For example he mentions, "For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly place" (Eph. 6:12). Three things one can say about the satanic impediments Paul mentions. First, Paul indicated that there are evil spiritual forces against which he and other believers wrestle in the present age (Eph. 6:12). Second, Paul calls this type of opposition "the tricks of the devil" (Eph.6:11), and refers to the evil in other places as "the god of this age who has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of glory of Christ" (II Cor. 4:4).

After listing many other of his trials, sufferings, and afflictions in II Corinthians 11:23-27, Paul seals the list with a following statement, "And apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches" (II Cor. 11:28). Paul's constant concern for the spiritual well being of the believers in the churches that he had founded is present in many places throughout his writings. As he said, "For I wrote you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you" (II Cor. 2:3-4).

Paul's daily concern was a certain sense or fear of possible failure in his mission. He says, "now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak spirits, whose slaves you want to be once more? I am afraid I have labored over you in vain" (Gal. 4:9-11).

One could say that at the center of Paul's spiritual experience and evangelism exists a profound and remarkable image of entering into the dying of Christ. The dilemma of hardship lived during his apostolic ministry is demonstrated through some of his letters such as Galatians, Corinthians, Philippians, Romans, Colossians, Thessalonians, Ephesians, and the Book of Acts. We saw how even when the apostle proclaims the gospel by prayer, word and actions, he was disturbed by strong suffering and the uncomfortable hostility of evil. Although Paul's suffering is mostly represented by external suffering and afflictions, it was its inner spiritual impact that caused the deepest pain. One can notice that out of this experience Paul understood the life and power of God at work, creating and sustaining the church, and making it possible for him to proclaim the reality of the resurrection with astonishing conviction and clarity.

Central to the hard work was Paul's own knowledge of the proximity of Christ, and the strength of his personal relationship with him.

Paul is willing to share his suffering in growing conformity with his death, in hope of somehow accomplishing the resurrection of the dead. Paul understands that Christ will transform our humble bodies, and give them a shape like that of God's own glorious body. The secret of Paul's experience is that in the suffering and dying lies the power of God and the transformation of a person. Paul's concept of suffering does not end with his own experience. Indeed, for Paul, suffering is part of necessary outworking process related to salvation in Christ, a reality of life with Christ that not only he himself but also all believers in Christ, and the whole creation are vulnerable to experience. Paul sees in his sufferings as an apostle the prolongation of the passion of Christ and links with Jesus Christ all the suffering of believers. Humiliation and persecution are freely accepted by the believer as a form of sharing in the destiny of his or her Lord who through suffering entered into God's glory.