

Week Forty-eight: Suffering and Kingdom Advancement - Romans 8:17-18; 2 Corinthians 4:7-18; 11:22-28; 12:7-10



Overview

One doesn't have to read far into the Bible's story before seeing that the hand of persecution has always been against Kingdom-minded people. Abel, the first martyr, dies because he offers an acceptable sacrifice to God; Joseph ends up in prison in Egypt for declaring God's purpose and living for what is right; and, Moses flees Egypt for attempting to rescue his ungrateful kin.

Persecution has always accompanied gospel proclamation and gospel living. Jesus suffered at the hands of the rebellious and unbelieving, and those who followed Him suffered as well. Steven was stoned to death, and historians tell us that all the Apostles but John died horrific deaths. Other than Christ, no one suffered more for the gospel than the Apostle Paul. Christ's suffering introduced the kingdom of God on earth. Steven's stoning was the catalyst that introduced the kingdom of God to Saul; Paul's suffering advanced the kingdom of God to the Gentiles throughout the known world.

This lesson focuses on how Paul's suffering advanced the kingdom of God.

Lesson Objective:

At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be able understand how suffering accompanies gospel living and how God uses suffering to expand His kingdom.

Key Truths

Suffering accompanies personal spiritual growth as followers of Jesus Christ deny self, take up their cross, and follow Christ.

Suffering accompanies kingdom growth as communities of believers resist false teaching and proclaim the good news of salvation by grace through faith.

Suffering advances the kingdom of God in ways that only God understands.

Lesson Outline

1. The value of suffering - Romans 8:16-18

Twice in his epistle to the Romans Paul highlights the value of suffering. First he indicates that suffering is a part of the gospel package, speaking of believers' standing before God: "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" (8:16-17, emphasis added). He puts suffering into perspective, "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" (8:18). Submission to suffering for the gospel's sake magnifies the worth of the message. The watching world marvels that people would suffer loss rather than yield truth.

2. The extent of suffering - 2 Corinthians 4:7-18; 11:22-28; 12:7-10

- Paul's attitude regarding suffering - 2 Corinthians 4:7-18

Paul recognizes that the body is a temporary dwelling, an earthly vessel, for an eternal treasure; therefore, he mentions physical suffering as an opportunity for Christ's manifestation, "that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body . . . that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh" (4:10-11). He actually considers the sufferings he experiences as a "light affliction" (4:17). Paul welcomes suffering because he understands that somehow, in God's economy, godly suffering renews the inward man "day by day," and that suffering "is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" (4:16-17). It's not that he is saying to suffering, "Bring it" but that he welcomes what suffering produces in the one who stays the course.

- Paul's literal suffering - 2 Corinthians 11:22-28
- **Physical Suffering** - whippings, imprisonments under harsh conditions, neardeath experiences, beatings, stonings, shipwreck, arduous travels, robbery, weariness, hunger and thirst, sleeplessness, "besides the other things, what comes upon me daily" (11:24-28)
- **Mental Suffering** - anguish over the welfare of the people he loves and the churches he plants—"my deep concern for all the churches" (11:28)—and the anger that he feels when their spiritual welfare is threatened (11:29)
- **Emotional Suffering** - the continual onslaught of false accusations by the Jews everywhere he goes, being misunderstood, misrepresented, and slandered
- **Spiritual Suffering** - the thorn in the flesh and buffeting by Satan prevent him from becoming proud (12:7-10).

Paul summarizes his suffering by pointing to the sufficiency of God's grace—"And He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness'" (12:9). He also physically demonstrates that God's power is manifest in human weakness. Paul suffers everywhere he takes the gospel, but he also bears fruit in each of those places. Kings hear the gospel, the people of Malta receive the gospel, and individual lives and communities are changed.

Application - What does this lesson teach us about God? Man? Sin? Redemption?

Paul suffered greatly so that the Gentiles would have the gospel. Suffering accompanies Kingdom growth.

Paul's conversion and calling wrecked any ambition he may have entertained toward an easy life.

Understanding the lostness of others and their dependence upon hearing the gospel should drive kingdom people to embrace the suffering that accompanies gospel proclamation.

Summary

God speaks through the sufferings of His people to bring others to Himself.

God acts through those who are willing to lay down their lives for the sake of the gospel and its proclamation.

God reveals the temporariness of suffering in light of the glory that only eternity will reveal.

Discussion Questions

Describe the kind of suffering that would take place today, should someone of Paul's caliber and passion for the gospel show up in your city.

What prices are believers today willing to pay for friends and relatives to hear and see the gospel lived out? What prices have you paid?