



03. 1 Thessalonians 1:4-6

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1 Thessalonians 1:4

4 For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that God has chosen you

Paul addresses them affectionately and in faith as his ‘**brothers and sisters**’. Together they have been loved by God with the love which God has for his Son, Jesus, and they have inherited Jesus’ communion with his Father. When Paul writes: ‘**God has chosen you**’, he is giving expression to a central aspect of his own experience. As a Jew he was very conscious, and rightly so, of belonging to a people who had been especially chosen by God. He was determined to be faithful to that choice and to defend Judaism from being infected through its contact with the Greek world. This was also behind his vehement opposition to the Christian church. When God revealed his Son to Paul (Galatians 1:16), Paul came to see that God had chosen every people and every person for communion with Himself through being united to his Son.

1 Thessalonians 1:5-6

⁵because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with abundant effect; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit.

As proof of God's choice of them and as a sign that they have welcomed God's grace into their lives, Paul appeals to their experience of what actually happened when he, Silvanus and Timothy came among them. Many memories are contained in Paul's simple words: memories of physical, psychological and spiritual healing, and especially memories of a powerful release of liberating and creative energy, of dramatic changes in people's lives, as well as memories of selfless love as they experienced the Spirit of God in their midst.

Faith is something learned through imitation, ultimately through imitation of Jesus, the Messiah and Lord. This is not an imitation 'from the outside', as it were, but the imitation which happens when we are drawn into communion with Jesus through the gift of his Spirit. Jesus' life-giving Spirit is active, transforming our lives, so that it is Jesus' own faith that we are experiencing, and his love and his hope. As Paul writes to the Galatians: 'It is no longer I who live. It is the Messiah who lives in me' (Galatians 2:20).

1 Thessalonians 1:6

⁶in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Paul's words here to the Thessalonians, invite us to ask: How can we learn to give ourselves in love when we are suffering? Or, in Paul's words: How can we, 'in spite of persecution', continue to welcome God's grace 'in joy inspired by the Holy Spirit'?

The only way to discover the key to unlocking some of the mysteries of suffering in the Christian life is through contemplation of Jesus in his sufferings. To do this we need a special grace, for, as Paul says: 'We proclaim the Messiah crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, the Messiah, the power of God and the wisdom of God' (1 Corinthians 1:22-24).

What revealed God to Paul as a God of love was not the crucifixion. It was not Jesus' sufferings in themselves or his atrocious death. Rather, it was the way in which Jesus responded to the injustice, the envy, the hatred, the fear and the political manoeuvring that brought about his death. It was the fact that 'He gave himself for our sins to set us free' (Galatians 1:4). Paul was able to say: 'I have been crucified with the Messiah, and it is no longer I who live. It is the Messiah who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me' (Galatians 2:20).

Jesus continued to do his Father's will, even on the cross, as he continued to pray, to believe, to hope and to love, The sin of others was able to bring about his death, but it was unable to take away his life. It comes as no surprise that the crucified Messiah was a scandal to Jews and utter foolishness to Greeks. Only one who is sustained by grace and who dares to look beyond the suffering and to enter into the heart of Jesus as he offers forgiveness and hope and love from the cross can begin to find meaning there.

Without such contemplation what sense would it make to look for meaning in our lives, and for freedom from the burden of suffering, to be told that the one offering us salvation is a person who was crucified? To break through the scandal and apparent folly of such a suggestion, Paul had to make some sense of it himself. His message was not that God causes suffering and so we must submit to it. Besides the fact that such an idea lacks attraction, it is clearly wrong. A large part of suffering is the result of people's sinful refusal or inability to obey God. Salvation means salvation from such sin, not acceptance of it. Nor was it Paul's message that if we believe we will be freed from suffering. The facts speak for themselves.

If anything, the suffering experienced by the Thessalonians increased as a result of their decision to believe. When they turned their backs on the false gods honoured by their fellow citizens, they found themselves cut off from a good deal of ordinary social interaction. This made them objects of suspicion, and when things were not going well, the superstitious populace blamed this on the Christians' neglect of the gods.

There is no suggestion that the persecution which the Thessalonians were suffering was itself God's will. As in the case of Jesus, the suffering was largely the result of prejudice and unwillingness or inability to be open to the liberating message of the gospel. As Paul says, it was in spite of persecution (not because of it) that the Christians in Thessalonica welcomed the gospel with joy.

Suffering has an irreplaceable role to play in bringing us to the realisation that we discover ourselves only in God's love, and that to enjoy God's love and to be instruments of bringing others to enjoy it we must transcend our own ego. We must let go of our natural tendency to focus on ourselves. We must learn to give ourselves as Jesus gave himself on the cross. It is suffering that forces us to recognise the basic flaw in our thinking that we are meant to be self-reliant. It forces us to face our dependence and it invites us to trust, for we cannot reach the goal of our human fulfilment, let alone do God's will, except in dependence upon and communion with God. Without suffering, there is a tendency to stay fixed in situations that work, that feel comfortable, and in which we feel affirmed. Suffering threatens this equilibrium, and psychic energy is engaged which drives us to face whatever it is that is causing the suffering and the effects it has upon us.

To manage suffering we have to learn to listen at every level to what is going on in our psyche as well as in our body. We may choose simply to hold on, to stay put, to defend our position. However, when we listen, we hear ourselves being asked to let go, and to allow to die something that has seemed good, and perhaps has in fact been good, and to entrust ourselves to the grace that is being offered to us in and through the suffering. We are free to choose to avoid the pain of letting go our self-centredness, or we can cry out in pleading prayer to God on whom we depend, entrust ourselves to God's grace, courageously endure whatever suffering is involved, and allow ourselves to undergo what feels like a kind of dying, believing that God will raise us up. All along the road of life there are 'dyings' as we have to leave someone or something we value; as we come up against our own or other people's limitations which require us to let go our self-image or our image of others and our unrealistic hopes, dreams and expectations.

Each time we accept to 'die', we experience a deeper communion with God who loves us through our dying, and who raises us up to a fuller life of deeper intimacy. Our fidelity, generosity and courage enable God to keep offering us a fuller life, beyond our experienced horizons. This will involve suffering until all roots of resistance to God's love have been purified away by God's Holy Spirit, the living flame of love. We learn this difficult lesson by contemplating Jesus in his suffering. He gives us an example, and by sharing his Spirit with us, he encourages and enables us to follow him along the path of letting go, the path of suffering. By keeping our eyes on Jesus, especially on his way of responding to suffering, it is possible for us to glimpse in suffering a meaning that would otherwise evade us. In our weakness and suffering, we experience a special strength that is not our own.

Like Jesus in the agony, Paul prayed for the burden of suffering to be lifted from him. He shares with us Jesus' response: 'The Lord said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of the Messiah may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of the Messiah; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong' (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

Much pain in our world results from our reaction to unjust suffering inflicted on us by others. We tend to hurt back. Or, when we do not do that, we store up the hurt and pass it on to others. In either case, the pain goes on and on. Let us listen to Jesus: 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely because of me. Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven' (Matthew 5:10-12).

It is true that our reward will be experienced in full 'in heaven', in the sense that beyond death we will be taken into the fullness of communion with God. Jesus, however, is not restricting his words to that. In 'heaven' means in 'God' . We will experience the reign of God now: 'the kingdom of heaven is theirs'. If, like Jesus, we learn to give ourselves now in love, even in the midst of suffering, we will experience now a special grace of communion. What is more, such loving exercises an extraordinary power for the conversion of those who cause us the suffering. It can also give courage also to those who suffer and who do not know how to bear it.

For the disciple of Jesus there is a profound sense in which suffering can unite us to him. Truly, love is the greatest gift. But if we love the way Jesus loved, it will not be long before suffering enters our lives as it entered his. If, like Jesus, we love outsiders, we, like Jesus, will become outsiders. If, like Jesus, we take the part of the oppressed, we, like Jesus, will be oppressed. This was Paul's experience. He wanted to live with Jesus and so he wanted to suffer with him.

Perhaps the most wonderful thing about suffering is that, through it, Jesus invites us to join with him in redeeming the world. It is this truth that caused Jesus' followers to find joy in their sufferings: 'I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and I am completing what is lacking in my flesh in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church' (Colossians 1:24).

It seems true that to experience the Messiah as exalted we have to experience him as crucified. To know the power of God's redeeming love, we need to look upon the one we have pierced (John 19:37). We need to put our hand into his pierced side and our fingers into his wounds (John 20:27) — the wounds of his brothers and sisters with whom, as the Son of Man, he still identifies. Did not Jesus say to Paul on the road to Damascus: 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting' (Acts 9:5)?

The amount of good that is in our world, as a result of suffering borne in love, is immeasurable. Paul considers such suffering a privilege: 'God has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well' (Philippians 1:29).

‘It is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus the Messiah. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh’ (2 Corinthians 4:6-10).

There is a mystery here that goes beyond our understanding. But our life-experience will not allow us to ignore it.

Christianity has no answers to the meaninglessness of suffering brought upon ourselves and others by our failure to listen to God. It does, however, show us a way to integrate suffering into our lives. At the same time, it is apparent that there is excessive suffering in our world. People are degraded by suffering, dragged down by it, and have their lives rendered inhuman by it. Christianity lays upon everyone the duty to work against suffering and its causes. Like Jesus, we are to act as instruments of God, bringing healing and liberation to the sufferer. Discernment is necessary, and the causes of suffering need to be named and opposed. But it is not for us to sit in judgment, to look for culprits or to apportion blame. We are to work for just institutions and just structures. But we cannot wait for this to happen. We are called upon to feed the hungry now. We are called, now, to give drink to the thirsty, to visit those in prison and to work to heal the sick.

Finally, we need to remember that death necessarily sets limits to any possibilities we have of alleviating suffering. There can be no solution short of the resurrection: 'I want to know the Messiah and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death' (Philippians 3:10).

While we strive, in response to God's grace and call, to be God's faithful servants in bringing about the reign of God here on earth, we recognise that our ultimate homeland is in the love-communion with God which we call 'heaven': 'Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus, the Messiah. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself' (Philippians 3:20-21).

In this life we will experience being transformed into Jesus, but it is only in the eternal life that is beyond death that we are assured of being finally and totally drawn into God's own love-communion, the communion enjoyed by the risen Jesus: 'We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence ... So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. 'For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling ... so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life' (2 Corinthians 4:14 – 5:4).

If we think that whatever suffering exists in this world is willed by God (either directly intended by God or permitted by God), we will see our task as one of accepting suffering in all its forms. We will see such submission as doing God's will, while trusting in God's wisdom and love. If, on the other hand, we recognise that, whatever the circumstances, God's will is that we love and be faithful to love; if we recognise that suffering is part of life and that its causes are complex and sometimes quite contrary to God's will, we will see our task as accepting the suffering which we are unable to prevent, without letting it deter us from loving faithfully. When we experience suffering ourselves or experience others suffering, we will not automatically assume that it is God's will. Rather, we will trust that God is present to all who are suffering and loving us to draw closer to God through our suffering, whatever its cause.

We may even draw so close to Jesus through suffering that we embrace the opportunity to share with him in revealing God's love in this special way to those for whom Jesus gave his life.

Jesus was willing to lay down his life, not to die but to continue in the intimate life of love which he had with his Father. He laid down his life willingly 'in order to take it up again' (John 10:17), and he is encouraging his disciples to do the same, for he has come not that we might die but that we may 'have life and have it abundantly' (John 10:10). Sharing his life we 'will not die' (John 6:50). 'Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes' (John 5:21). The power that makes possible the victory of life over death is the power of love which, like everything else, he has from the Father (see John 5:26).

We are called to believe that suffering comes within the loving and wise providence of God. We are called to believe that God's will is to heal us and to liberate us from suffering. Ultimately this will happen when we share glory with God's Son in heaven; but we can experience liberation here on earth when love heals, and when to be healed leads to greater love.

If we continue to suffer, let us continue to believe in God's love. Let us keep hoping for God's redemption. Let us remain faithful to loving. Then suffering itself will be experienced as a grace, deepening our love and bringing about our purification and redemption. Suffering is part of every life. Let suffering be a cross for us who are disciples of Jesus, for then we can embrace him who died there, knowing that he is embracing us.