

Today I want to strike up a song of praise on the *via dolorosa*, the way of the cross or the way of suffering. Some of you may think that it is not something on which to strike up a song of praise, but if you think about it for some time, you will find that it has to be one of the most precious elements of your spiritual life. When the Lord bestows on us the gift of grace, you may think He is giving us something we do not need. But no, He gives it so that by his grace we can follow the way of the cross .

The dogma believed by many Christians and Christian churches today, goes like this: My Father is King of the universe and can do anything. Whenever I need something (no matter what) He gives it to me, for his word says *everything you ask of me in the name of my Son I will give you*. So if I have asked anything, I just have to believe and I will get it. As a matter of fact, I should even be able to move mountains if only I have faith. If I have a problem, I can simply pray to the Father and He will put a legion of angels at my disposal to help me. We possess everything like the brother of the prodigal son. When we are ill or see someone who is ill or handicapped, it is no problem. We simply pray for him and he is healed. This is known as the "prosperity doctrine".

Although all the above truths are taken from the Bible, I myself haven't had an easy life and when I read the history of the old pilgrims, Paul and the Lord Jesus I find that they did not have such an easy life either.

As a matter of fact, just after Saul met the Lord the Lord tells Ananias in Acts 9:16: *I will show him how much he must suffer for my name*. This is called the way of the cross.

Let us first look at the old pilgrims in Heb 11:26: *Moses regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward*.

From verse 32: *And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about*

Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, 35 others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. 36 Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. 37 They were stoned; they were sawn in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and ill-treated –

38 the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. 39 These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. 40 God had planned something better for us, so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

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The previous time when I spoke on grace, I said that this grace should inspire us to serve the Lord and the brothers and the sinners. As a matter of fact, Paul says in 2 Cor 6:1 *...and as God's fellow-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain*. He then proceeds by mentioning his own sufferings *...but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; 5 in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; 6 in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; 7 in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; 8 through glory and dishonour, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten and yet not killed; sorrowful yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything*.

He continues in 2 Cor 11:23: *Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again.. 24 Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea -- 26 I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. 27 I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?*

30 If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. 31 *The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised for ever, knows that I am not lying. 32 In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. 33 But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.*

Looking at the Lord Jesus himself, we find the following:

As a new-born baby he was laid in a manger. Shortly after his birth he already had to flee from Herod. At the beginning of his ministry in Nazareth they wanted to push him over a cliff. He did not have a place to put down his head, he had no resources like money. They accused him falsely, crucified him, flogged him, etcetera. Isaiah 53 *...He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Psalm 22 ... But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people. 7 All who see me mock me;*

they hurl insults, shaking their heads: 'He trusts in the Lord; let the Lord deliver him, since he delight in him.' Many bulls surround me; strong bulls of Bashan encircle me. 13 Roaring lions tearing their prey open their mouths wide against me. 14 I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted away within me. 15 My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death. 16 Dogs have surrounded me; a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet. 17 I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me. 18 I

Therefore the Lord has a good plan and purpose with this way of the cross which we must also follow after his example.

1. The further purpose of the way of suffering is **so that we can be witnesses to his name**: Peter says in 1 Pet 2:20 ...*But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. So in the first instance the way of suffering is there to accept and experience grace.* How often we refuse to experience or accept grace and plod along in our own strength.

2. Matt 10:17 *Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. 18 On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles.*

3. In the third instance **because it is for the sake of his name**: Luke 21:17 ... *All men will hate you because of me.*

Since in this way we can follow in his footsteps. He travelled the way of the cross to the end. He was also hated: John 15:24 ... *and yet they have hated both me and my Father.*

4. In the fourth instance **since it produces perseverance.** Rom 5:3 ...*because we know that suffering produces perseverance. And we need perseverance* Heb 10:36 ... *You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.*

5. **In the fifth place because it produces character.** Rom 5:4 ... *and perseverance (produces) character and*

6. **in the sixth place because it produces hope.** Rom 5:4...*and character produces hope 5 and hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.*

7. Seventh: **Because it teaches us obedience.** Heb 5:8 ... *Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered.* You will agree with me that it is the only way of learning obedience. I know of no other way.

8. **To show us his love and give us conversion out of grace.** Rev. 3:19 ...*Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent.*

9. **It helps us to experience his comfort.** 2 Cor 1:7 ... *And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.*

10. **So that we will not rely on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead;** 2 Cor 1:7.

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11. **To reveal to us the compassion and mercy of God.** James 5:10 ... *as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. 11 As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.*

12. **To receive what was promised.** Heb 10:36 *You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.* I have already referred to this above.

13. **So that we can be perfect and without lacking anything.** James 1:4 *Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*

To us human beings this way of suffering does not appeal, but one day when we are taken up into eternal glory we will say as Rom 8:18 puts it **FOR I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.** In Rom 7:24 Paul also exclaims: *What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? It is Jesus Christ our Lord – (by means of this way of suffering).*

Indeed, I see that this way of suffering produces so many good things in my life that I can already praise the Lord with conviction and serve him with joy. That I do not need to complain, for (Rom 8:28) we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.

It is clear that I have to take up the cross and also undergo crucifixion (Rom 6:6 and Gal 2:20 ...I have been crucified with Christ). Do you suppose this points to pleasant circumstances? No, they denote the way of suffering.

I want to conclude with a personal testimony. I had a client about 20 years ago who truly served the Lord and who was an example to me. At a certain point things went wrong for him. He was very wealthy, yet lost everything and in the process his wife as well. Just before this the Lord spoke to me personally and said: I had to ride the donkey on the way to Calvary – he is no better than I am! In Rom 8:6 the Scriptures say: Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.

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