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SUFFERING IN APOLOGETIC MISSION

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Christians, those rescued from an eternal hell and a fruitless earthly existence through the matchless achievements of Jesus Christ, often (ironically and tragically) fail to join the cruel and bloodstained cross of Jesus to their own life of discipleship under that cross. So excruciating (investigate the etymology of that word) is this Christian catastrophe, that theologian Professor Michael Horton wrote a haunting, convincing, and disturbing book called *Christless Christianity*.¹ Sadly, unlike the books it criticized, it was not a bestseller. It does, however, have the compensating benefit of being true (John 8:31–32). As Isaiah said, “truth stumbles in the streets” in a God-forsaken and therefore truth-denying time (Isa. 59:14).

Although Horton did not specifically address suffering in apologetics, the cross of Christ bears exhaustively on every facet of Christian existence. As Jesus admonished, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?” (Luke 9:23–25; all quotations from the NIV).

Notice that bearing the cross in light of Christ’s cross is not optional or negotiable for the Christ-follower. Rather, it is a divine requirement. We find crosses everywhere (even as jewelry casually worn), but it is always easier to see it than to fathom it, to wear it than to bear it. It is a strange and sickening disorder indeed that cheapens the most consequential symbol humanity has yet produced. Some churches even refuse to exhibit crosses, lest any tender soul be offended. But the cross itself is necessarily an offense to human pride, and must always be such. “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18, cf. vv. 23–24).

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CROSS

Before applying the broken body and shed blood of Jesus to the apologetic imperative (1 Pet. 3:15), we must concisely consider the objective fact of Christ’s death, its eternal significance. Christ was a man born to die. Yes, he was perfectly virtuous and taught with unrivaled wise authority (Matt. 7:28–29).² Theologians call this “the active obedience of Christ.” As the second Adam, Christ accomplished what the first Adam

failed to do: perfectly obey God in His true humanity through reliance on the Holy Spirit. As God Incarnate, He also accepted worship, forgave sins (Mark 2), claimed unique knowledge of the Father (Matt. 11:27), and raised the dead (John 11). Yet during His active obedience, Christ suffered profoundly over the unbelief of His disciples, the false doctrine of Israel's religious leaders (Matt. 23), and over death itself (John 11:35). Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would be "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isa. 53:3). "Jesus wept" (John 11:35).

Jesus also perfectly obeyed His Father in His "passive obedience," which means His willingness to accept the cross for us and to glorify God, the Father. Although He could have called down legions of angels to save Him from this hideous death, He did not (26:53). As the Lamb of God (John 1:29), He knew He must go to an unjust slaughter to redeem the unjust by His vicarious and atoning sacrifice (Isa. 53). Without this horrendous cross, on which Jesus experienced the worst possible suffering, there could be no salvation. Yet, He endured the cross, despising its shame, for the joy set before Him (Heb. 12:2). Nor did the agony of the God-forsaken cross (Mark 15:34) stop Him from teaching and evangelizing. He converted one of the criminals being crucified along with Him (Luke 18), gave John instructions about the care of His mother, and even forgave those who murdered Him.

Ponder apologist Blaise Pascal's masterful summary of Jesus' ministry:

He alone had to produce a great people, elect, holy and chosen, lead them, feed them, bring them into the place of rest and holiness, make them holy for God, make them the temple of God, reconcile them to God, save them from God's anger, redeem them from the bondage of sin which visibly reigns in man, give laws to his people, write these laws in their hearts, offer himself to God for them, sacrifice himself for them, be a spotless sacrifice, and himself the sacrificer, having himself to offer up his body and blood, and yet offer up bread and wine to God.³

OUR SUFFERING

Of course, Jesus came to earth (John 1:14, 18; Phil. 2:4–11) to die, to be buried, to rise from the dead triumphant, and to give us new life when we receive Him as Lord (John 1:12–13; 3:16; 10:30). But in a fallen and groaning world still under the curse (Rom. 8:18–26), our bringing the message of life to a dying world often means suffering (in all manner of ways). Yet American Christianity seldom embraces this, in apologetics or elsewhere. I cannot develop a theology of suffering here,⁴ but will instead relate godly and Christ-honoring suffering to the endeavor of Christian apologetics. By apologetics, I mean bringing the objective truth of the gospel to an unbelieving world through reason, evidence, providential acts, and a godly life.⁵ This holy and commanded endeavor (1 Pet. 3:15) will bring at least two kinds of suffering, both of which we must embrace and which God will employ for our sanctification and the extension of His Kingdom (Matt. 6:33; Rom. 8:28).

Lamenting Unbelief

First, the apologist suffers simply because so many people fail to believe the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ, despite our most earnest efforts. This suffering takes two forms: suffering for God's glory and suffering for those who are perishing. We find this anguish in the apostle Paul as he enters Athens, the great pagan city of the ancient world. He was "greatly distressed" at the idolatry he beheld there (Acts 17:16), since he knew that the one true God tolerates no worship of finite things (Exod. 20; 1 John 5). Paul was zealous for the truth of God to be made known, for this is God's mission throughout history.⁶ But instead of losing his temper or collapsing in a theologically induced coma, he offers a model apologetic sermon to some of the most influential minds of the day (Acts 17:16–34). Although Paul was a profoundly effective apologist, evangelist, and church planter, he deeply lamented the unbelief of so many of his Jewish countrymen. After writing the most systematic presentation of the Christian worldview found in the Bible in chapters 1–8 of Romans, the apostle cries from the heart: "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, the people of Israel" (Rom. 9:2–3; see also 10:1).

Sorrow for the Lost

Many of us need to regain this sense of sacred sorrow over the lost. Jesus came "to seek and save the lost," yet so many are still so lost, so far from saving faith (Eph. 2:8). Given our pluralistic culture, it is much too easy to make our peace with religious diversity. The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution rightly guarantees "the free exercise of religion," but that does not imply that all religions are right. Many are wrong; in fact, any religion that denies the gospel is both wrong and dangerous, since it will (unless corrected) lead its adherents to hell. Paul knew this when he corrected the terrible heresy of legalism that was afflicting the church at Galatia:

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!

Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ. (Gal. 1:8–10 NIV)

It is certainly "pleasing" to those in a relativistic and pluralistic culture not to rock the religious boat by claiming that Jesus is the only way to be reconciled to a holy God. But we do not have that option. As Peter preached, filled with the Holy Spirit: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12; see also Matt. 11:27; John 14:1–6; 1 Tim. 2:5).

Despite our culture's spiritual apathy and endorsement of a generic "spirituality" (2 Tim. 3:1-7), the gospel of Jesus Christ is "a flaming truth" (Francis Schaeffer) that "was once for all entrusted to God's holy people" (Jude 3). This priceless revelation must be made known, "in season and out of season" (2 Tim. 4:2).

Personal Persecution

A second kind of suffering is amply attested in Scripture: persecution for the sake of one's commitment to Christ. While Paul ultimately triumphed in his preaching in Athens, he was also viciously insulted. Before being invited to speak to the Areopagus (a ruling counsel of thinkers), his preaching was rejected as a hodgepodge of previously given ideas. Thus, they deemed him a "babbling" (Acts 17:18). The Greek word for *babbling* means a seed-picking bird that eats various things. So, in essence, Paul was called a "birdbrain." Yet he remained undaunted in his ministry and found a more receptive audience. But even after his speech before the Areopagus, "some sneered" at his teaching (Acts 17:32). That must have hurt this brilliant and Spirit-filled man of God.

A BLESSED BURDEN

Although it may strike us as odd, when we suffer derision, ridicule, or even physical imprisonment or torture when we defend the gospel of Christ, we are "blessed." Blessing is a deep concept in Scripture, but it means more than "happy." As Jesus promised: "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matt. 5:10-12).

"Blessing" is an objective state of being in God's will. Thus, we may be blessed even when we suffer, if we suffer for the gospel, in apologetics or otherwise. The apostle Peter sounds the same theme in 1 Peter, a book dedicated to teaching the faithful how to suffer in a godly manner while being persecuted for their religion. The man who told us to always have a reason for the hope within us (1 Pet. 3:15), also said this: "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you" (1 Pet. 4:12-14). Peter adds another element to suffering for Christian witness: the glory of God. We are not simply doing God's will; we also receive the divine glory in carrying it out while suffering for the crucified One. And there is more glory to come when Christ is revealed from heaven.

There are several other areas where apologetic faithfulness leads to godly suffering, but our central point is this: suffering in apologetic endeavor is to be expected and not refused by the faithful witnesses of Christ. We will not (by definition) enjoy it, but we need not fear it (2 Tim. 1:7). It will build our character and bear fruit for the cause of Christ.

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NOTES

- 1 Michael Horton, *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008). Similar works sound the same sorrowful themes, such as David Wells, *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) and *God in the Wasteland* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995). Very likely, the best book about the cross in my generation is John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986).
- 2 He also taught as a philosopher. See Douglas Groothuis, *On Jesus* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2003).
- 3 Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, ed. A. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin, 1966), 608, 766; on the claims and credentials of Jesus, see also, Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, chap. 20.
- 4 See D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord?* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006).
- 5 See Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, esp. chaps. 2–3.
- 6 See Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006).