

## Suffering with Him (Rom 8.17)

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### Introduction

In Romans 8:17 Paul is working out the implication of being children in relation to the life promised those who put sin to death (v. 13). If you are children (you have the Spirit, are led by the Spirit) then life is assured because children are heirs a) of God, and b) co-heirs as such with Christ. Children of God receive what God, in matchless wisdom and power, provides those He loves. Members of God's family have God as their portion. They have access to God, communion with God, knowledge of God, and all this means they unquestionably have eternal life (this is eternal life, to know You, the only true God, Jn. 17:3). Having eternal life as children means they have a share in His glory (Rom. 8:17b).

This last thought brings to mind how Christ attained His glory. It was through suffering. This causes Paul to reach back to the notion of suffering for Christians in their journey to glory. As it was for Him so it is for us. As He entered glory through suffering so do we.

Verse 17 is transitional (particularly, 17b, NIV, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory). *This means that verse 17 serves as a closure for the foregoing and a mini-introduction to what follows.* Closure to the previous section is present in the move from life to heir-ship to glory as opening up a single flower: to live means to be an *heir* of God, to be a *co-heir* with Christ, and to be *bound for glory*. But suffering is a precondition upon which participation in glory is contingent. Thus the discussion of the life that we will inherit at the end of our journey on earth causes Paul to address a key ingredient of this journey: suffering. Therefore, there is now a shift in the text. Attention shifts from the Spirit's witness (v. 16) to the theme of suffering. Specifically, the theme is introduced as "suffering with Him."

### 1A. Suffering with Him is to be expected

Jesus taught us to expect sufferings (there is a cross in following, **Matt. 16:24**). Paul spoke of it often in his letters (it is granted that we believe and suffer, **Phil. 1:27-30**). Part of knowing Christ better and better, which is something surpassingly great, is sharing in his sufferings, becoming like Him in His death (**Phil. 3:7-11**).

It is a great preparation for life's trials to know that suffering with Him is to be expected, and it is a great help in these trials to remember this fact.

### 2A. Suffering with Him is necessary

Glory with Christ will only be attained by means of the precondition of suffering. This is both *necessary and sufficient* for entrance into glory. To say it is necessary is to say that we *must* traverse this pathway in order to reach kingdom glory. This fact was part and parcel of Paul's preaching and establishing of churches with elders (**Acts 14:21-23**). It was a resource for Paul in his own suffering, and it was proverbial in the early church (**2 Tim. 2:8-13**).

To say, "suffering is necessary and sufficient for entrance into glory" accents the promise of life and glory that we attain by following this narrow pathway. If you suffer with Him, then it is certain that you will be glorified with Him (Rom. 8:17).

Thus, our expectation of suffering is not simply a help in bracing ourselves for the worst. Expectation does prevent being taken by surprise and thus from being catapulted into despair. But there is more. When we remember that it is necessary and sufficient for entrance into glory then we have a deep foundation of hope. Calvin put it like this: "We must all therefore be prepared for this-that our whole life shall represent nothing else than the image of death, until it produce death itself, as the life of Christ is nothing else than a prelude of death." But there is "a choice consolation, that in all our miseries we are partakers of Christ's cross...so that *through afflictions the way is opened up for us to everlasting blessedness*" (*Phil.*, 99, italics mine). In the afflictions, we must look above them and beyond them. We must look above to our God and beyond to the coming glory that is entered *only* over this rocky way (as a must) and *surely* over this rocky way (if we suffer with Him we will, *without a doubt*, be glorified with Him).

### 3A. Suffering with Him is purposeful

We will not get an answer to the "why" question with a capital W but we do get an answer to the small case, "why?"

The purpose of suffering is not to satisfy the demands of justice. Thank God for that. We are not being purged of our sins in payment of the debt we owe to divine justice. For that we would need to endure suffering not only in this life but in an eternal purgatory (obviously one with no exit!). Instead, we share in His sufferings as preparation for participation in His glory. Our sufferings are part of the refining process in weaning us away from this earth and fitting us for heaven.

Does Paul in Romans 8:17 now leave grounding the exhortation to put sin to death? As an emphasis the exhortation is now fading, but it must remain *always in the background* as something grounded by every step in the unpacking of our union and communion with Christ. Suffering is part of resisting the flesh. How does this show up in the text? In the parallelism, in the promise of life parallel with glory: the way to life is the way to glory. And therefore the way to life and glory is by putting sin to death via suffering with Christ. The parallels can be combined: "if you put sin to death *and* suffer with Christ, you will live *and* share in His glory."

Suffering is not the whole of our battle with sin but it is an essential aspect. We may think of afflictions as causing conflict, trying our patience, revealing weakness, and the need for improvement. But they ultimately aid us in spiritual growth in teaching us dependence on the Lord, developing our faith that is more precious than silver and gold. As they try our faith they actually teach us the way of faith more perfectly.

Afflictions may be due to sin in our lives as a reaping for a sowing. But that is not necessarily the case. Job is a sinner but his trials are not because of his sin. Peter tells us of a central purpose for suffering grief in all kinds of trials: for the perfecting of our faith. And this is for an even higher goal: praise, glory and honor (ours and ultimately His; **1 Pet. 1:6-9**).

#### 4A. Suffering with Him is comforting

I think we have covered some very meaningful and helpful points regarding suffering with Christ. It is good to know that suffering with Him is to be expected, that it is necessary[,] and that it has a purpose for our good beyond the values of silver and gold, stocks and bonds, securities and treasury bills.

But one aspect has not been discussed as yet. We have not honed in on what it means to suffer *with Him* (to suffer *with* our co-heir). How should we take this point of suffering *with Christ*? We could omit "with Christ" and have: we suffer in order to be glorified. But glorification is with Christ and so is the suffering. So what does this add?

Omitting the phrase, "with Christ," we have the thought that our present time on earth involves trials, tribulations, and sufferings. These follow us, dogging our heels all our days. The point is that these sufferings are necessary as part of our attainment of life and thus as part of the process of putting sin to death. We need them. They are a precondition without which we will not enter into glory. They are part of the process of our battle with sin.

Now what does it add to all of this to say our suffering is "with Christ"?

Let's consider some options. 1) Some take it to refer to our suffering with Him in His death. But this is a present tense; it is going on now. 2) Others take it to refer to suffering in accord with His example. But this seems to over stretch the notion of "with" to the different notion of "according to" or following. 3) Some have it, "for His sake" but this seems remote: "being with you I am for you," or "I am for you as shown in the fact that I am with you." 4) For some it is suffering with Him in His present sufferings, in some kind of continuation of His sufferings in His present intercessory action. He shares in the suffering of His brethren, so He suffers and we share in it. This may be presupposed but the accent is not on His suffering with us but on our suffering with Him.

5) Finally, it is suggested that this is "in union and communion with Him." This is the option that I want to stress as a gem, a precious comforting truth. It is simply and wonderfully the case that when we suffer it is with Him, we are with Him and He is with

us. We suffer in His presence. This is like the passages that express the fact that waking or sleeping each of us can say, "I am with Him." The action of God that keeps us with Him is implicit in the context in Psalm 139.18b and it is explicit in Psalm 73.23. Note in Psalm 73 that it is not that we make Him our Sovereign so therefore He holds and guides us; instead, it is because He holds and guides us that we make Him our refuge and tell of His deeds. How is this different from the nonbeliever's suffering? The nonbeliever does not suffer with Christ; Christ is not with him in his suffering. The nonbeliever is alienated from God and suffers alone in the wilderness of this world outside of Eden; the nonbeliever is alone in the universe! They are unfaithful and they will perish (Ps. 73:27).

When we suffer, each of us can say, "I am going through this with Him." Obviously, this is because He is present with us so *we are present with Him*. We suffer in His presence but not just coldly sharing the same location. There is more: we are with Him not against; not separated or alienated; not pushed away; we are with Him in the positive connotation that can be poured into a warm "with." We are with Him *as His brothers and sisters* in the household of God, in the family. We are co-children, co-siblings, co-heirs with our resurrected elder Brother.

What is the difference if any between "with Him" and "with us"? What is the difference between our being with Him and His being with us? The difference can only be a matter of accent or perspective. Picture me at Patricia's bedside in intensive care at the hospital. She was suffering. She suffered *with me*. The accent is not on my suffering with her, though that occurred. The accent is on the fact of her suffering but *it was in my presence, with me at her side* (though I felt mostly useless).

Therefore we have to raise our eyes higher in this case of Patricia in the hospital. She suffered there with the risen Lord Jesus (She said the Lord was her Great Physician and I was her nurse). She suffered in God's presence but in the special way that believers suffer in God's presence. We suffer as His children in His family, with the elder Brother, *with the risen Savior at our bedsides*. Our union is a co-union as children and heirs. It is also a co-union, a communion, of suffering in which we suffer with Him right there at our side.

He is the Lord of heaven and earth. Still we suffer and we do so with Him now. Like it was for Him this is the way, the necessary way, to enter into glory (cf. though we belong to Him the body is subject to dying and death, v. 10).

So, our journey is like the pilgrimage of Jacob who was promised the land of Canaan at Bethel *on his way out* of the land for many long years (Gen. 28:10-22). *The promise was distant, in the distant future*, but for the time between God added this thought to His covenant: "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (v. 15). Like Jacob, we wait for the promise, but while we wait, He is with us in covenant communion; therefore, we are with Him wherever we go and in whatever we suffer. I will not leave you, I will do all I have promised, and I will see you through to heaven's glory.

### *The dynamic of endurance*

How is it possible that we will make it to glory, that we will endure to the end and be saved? This is possible due to the indwelling Spirit who assures us of our childship to God, prompts our affection for God as our Father, and who leads us on the pathway of holiness and truth. Because we have the Holy Spirit (my Holy Spirit, 1 Cor 14.15), our trials may knock us down but not out. Our faith will not fail. It will endure, not because we have something good in ourselves, but because the Holy Spirit gives faith to us and upholds us in faith at every step.

Consider the wall and flame in Pilgrim's Progress. The devil throws water on the fire coming out of the wall, on our faith, but behind the wall the Lord Jesus pours in the oil of the Spirit and though the flame may sputter and flicker, it will not go out. Jesus is with us in the sufferings; *therefore, we are with Him*. We suffer *with* Him there, we suffer in His presence, and He shares with us in our sufferings. He nurses us and unfailingly guides our life toward the goal of final glory.