



Counted Worthy to Suffer

by [Andrew Kulasingham](#) | 24th August 2020

Scripture Text – Acts 5:40-42

One of the most remarkable things about the early church was the way they embraced suffering as part of their portion in their desire to advance the Kingdom of God. As early as chapter five of the book of Acts we begin to see an understanding that opposition will be part of their life if they chose to preach the Gospel. Jesus had prepared His disciples for this during His time on earth.

Mark 10:38-39 (NLT) But Jesus said to them, “You don’t know what you are asking! Are you able to drink from the bitter cup of suffering I am about to drink? Are you able to be baptized with the baptism of suffering I must be baptized with?” “Oh yes,” they replied, “we are able!” Then Jesus told them, “You will indeed drink from my bitter cup and be baptized with my baptism of suffering.

Matthew 24:9 (NLT) “Then you will be arrested, persecuted, and killed. You will be hated all over the world because you are my followers.

John 21:18 (NLT) “I tell you the truth, when you were young, you were able to do as you liked; you dressed yourself and went wherever you wanted to go. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and others will dress you and take you where you don’t want to go.”

When the time came for the disciples to face persecution, they were prepared for it and not only endured it but embraced and counted it a privilege to suffer for Jesus Christ. In these days where the western church has experienced very little persecution if any, this concept of suffering for Christ may be one of the most timely reminders.

Recap: The story so far

Before we delve into the topic of suffering for the sake of the Gospel, it is important for us to remind ourselves of the story of the early church up to this point.

First group encounter: filled with the Holy Spirit and power

Acts 1:8 (NKJV) But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

Acts 2:1-4 (NLT) On the day of Pentecost all the believers were meeting together in one place. Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven like the roaring of a mighty windstorm, and it filled the house where they were sitting. Then, what looked like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them. And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability.

The encounter the disciples had after Christ ascended was on the day of Pentecost where everyone who was gathered at the upper room had a physical and undeniable experience with the Holy Spirit that totally transformed them. The physical manifestation made it absolutely clear that every one of them had received the promise which guaranteed them power from on high. We see this particularly in Peter's life as the story unfolds. Peter's two sermons which he preaches possibly within a few days apart had a phenomenal effect on what started as a small group of followers into a full blown community of over 10,000 people. After Pentecost, 3000 souls were added to the group of 120 and continued to grow daily.

Acts 2:41 (NLT) Those who believed what Peter said were baptized and added to the church that day—about 3,000 in all.

Acts 2:46-47 (NKJV) So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

Another growth spurt occurred a few days later when Peter preached following the healing of the lame man. Now there were 5000 men who believed in Jesus as the Christ. It will be an understatement to say that by this time the total gathering of the church on a regular basis would have grown to over 10,000.

Second group encounter: Filled with the Holy Spirit and boldness

With the rapid growth of the church came the expected persecution from the religious leaders. After the lame man was healed, the religious leaders attempt to contain the growth through imprisonment, threats and even physical beatings.

Acts 4:16-17 (NKJV) saying, "What shall we do to these men? For, indeed, that a notable miracle has been done through them is evident to all who dwell in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. 17 But so that it spreads no further among the people, let us severely threaten them, that from now on they speak to no man in this name."

Acts 5:40 (NLT) They called in the apostles and had them flogged. Then they ordered them never again to speak in the name of Jesus, and they let them go.

The response from the disciples which would become the pattern in the New Testament church was to pray for strength and grace to endure opposition and persecution.

Acts 4:29-31 (NKJV) Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word, by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus. "And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.

The church provided for the poor

As the church continued to grow, they also focused on ministering to the poor, which would become the core of what the New Testament church became – a community that didn't just care for their own but also for the needs of the community around them.

Acts 4:32-34 (NKJV) Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common. And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all. Nor was there anyone among them who lacked

The church in full throttle

By the time we get to Acts chapter five, the church is in full throttle, growing rapidly and well and truly engaging with the community around them. Supernatural occurrences had become a norm and were a natural consequence of the preaching of the Gospel.

Acts 5:12-16 (NKJV) And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. And they were all with one accord in Solomon's Porch. Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly. And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, so that they brought the sick out into the streets and laid them on beds and couches, that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might fall on some of them. Also a multitude gathered from the surrounding cities to Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed.

The unintended consequence of the expansion of the church was that it had become visible in plain sight to those who were in power to curtail religious gatherings.

Acts 5:17-21 (NKJV) Then the high priest rose up, and all those who were with him (which is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with indignation, and laid their hands on the apostles and put them in the common prison.

Acts 5:40-42 (NKJV) ... and when they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.

What is amazing about this story is that all the success and popularity the church had among the community didn't distract them from the one task they were given by the Lord – to go and preach the gospel. The most remarkable thing about this passage is that the disciples rejoiced at the opposition and suffering they were enduring as they saw it as an indication that they were on the right track. This was what Jesus had prophesied beforehand. They not only embraced the suffering but saw themselves privileged to be "counted worthy to suffer shame for His name".

Before we delve into the subject of suffering for the sake of the Gospel, it is important for us to understand the difference between suffering that comes as a consequence of preaching the gospel and the concept of suffering in general. Having a biblical

understanding of suffering will help us respond appropriately when facing various kinds of suffering we experience in life.

Understanding the concept of suffering in the Bible

We are not called to rejoice in all kinds of suffering. It is important for us to understand that all suffering is outside the perfect will of God. The cross is the symbol of God's will. He suffered so we will suffer no more.

Isaiah 53:4-6 (NLT) Yet it was our weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down. And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God, a punishment for his own sins! But he was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed. All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God's paths to follow our own. Yet the Lord laid on him the sins of us all.

Suffering, however, is real and very much part of our experience in life. It is important that we know that the suffering the early church saw as a privilege and rejoiced when they had to endure it was specifically suffering that came out of obedience to God. I want to make a few points about suffering before we look at suffering for the Gospel.

1. Suffering caused by Sickness is NOT sent by God

There is no Biblical basis to assume that any kind of sickness or disease comes from God. It is an affront to the work on the cross to even entertain any notion that God is the source of someone's sickness. When we give room to consider the possibility of sickness as a tool God uses to shape and mold us, we remove the potency of the prayer of healing.

Mark 16:15-18 (NLT) And then he told them, "Go into all the world and preach the Good News to everyone. ... These miraculous signs will accompany those who believe: ... They will be able to place their hands on the sick, and they will be healed."

James 5:14-15 (NLT) Are any of you sick? You should call for the elders of the church to come and pray over you, anointing you with oil in the name of the Lord. Such a prayer offered in faith will heal the sick, and the Lord will make you well. And if you have committed any sins, you will be forgiven.

What about Paul's "thorn" (2 Cor 12:1-10)? Wasn't that a sickness he had to endure? I disagree. There is no biblical basis to believe that the "thorn" Paul spoke of was a sickness he was battling with. Why couch it in a mysterious phrase like "thorn in the flesh" if it was as simple as a sickness that was impeding his drive to preach the gospel? Acknowledging it and seeking the church to pray for him would have been the more natural thing to do and consistent to what the book of James seems to suggest was the practice of the early church.

Instead, Paul refers to this "infirmity" as a "messenger of Satan to torment" him. But he also received a revelation from God that what Satan intended for evil, God was using for his good. This "thorn" was keeping him from becoming "exalted above measure" because of the "abundance of the revelations" he had received from God. It is also worth noting that Paul's initial response when faced with the infirmity was to pray for it to be taken away. In fact he does it three times and received the same reply from God.

2 Corinthians 12:8-9 (NLT) Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. Each time he said, "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness." So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me.

If someone was to assume that their sickness is a "thorn", then the following must also be true:

→ they have prayed multiple times for it to be taken away and received the same reply from the Lord

→ they are in a similar position with Paul where an abundance of revelation from God is causing them to struggle with spiritual pride

→ they are experiencing added grace and added power brought about by the said sickness

In all my years of ministry, I have never come across someone who has experienced more "power of Christ" in their life as a direct consequence of sickness. I have seen tremendous strength and perseverance by godly men and women in the midst of their sicknesses but never spiritual empowerment as a direct benefit from sickness.

2. Suffering that comes from trials in the end produces a disproportionate blessing compared to the loss

The Bible does talk about trials that come our way which can cause suffering. The entire tenor of Scripture however seems to suggest that trials are short lived and produce much more blessings than the sacrifice it required during that challenging time.

Psalms 30:5 (NLT) For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favour lasts a lifetime! Weeping may last through the night, but joy comes with the morning.

James 1:2-4 (NKJV) My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

Again we look to James who encourages to view "various trials" in a positive light as it does a perfecting work in us which will produce something complete in us removing the lack that was present prior to the trial. We see that in the life of Job.

Job 42:5 (NKJV) " I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear. But now my eye sees You."

Job 42:12-17 (NKJV) Now the Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning; for he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, one thousand yoke of oxen, and one thousand female donkeys. He also had seven sons and three daughters. And he called the name of the first Jemimah, the name of the second Keziah, and the name of the third Keren-Happuch. In all the land were found no women so beautiful as the daughters of Job; and their father gave them an inheritance among their brothers. After this Job lived one hundred and forty years, and saw his children and grandchildren for four generations. So Job died, old and full of days.

3. Suffering was used by the early church as a mark of identification with Christ in death and resurrection

Philippians 3:10-11 (NKJV) that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Paul speaks extensively about the metaphor of death and resurrection bringing it alive in our day to day experiences. In the passage above, he gives shows us the connection between resurrection power and suffering. In his mind, suffering enabled him to “fellowship” with Christ in the area of suffering. Paul’s suffering gave him the opportunity to identify with Christ suffering and death in order to experience the reality of resurrection and everything that comes with that. Suffering gives us the opportunity to be conformed to His death in order to attain resurrection power.

4. Suffering for the gospel was worn as a badge of honour

Acts 5:41-42 (NKJV) So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.

Finally, we are able to focus on suffering that comes as a direct consequence of preaching the gospel. This is the ultimate suffering that all Christians are invited to be part of. For the early church, suffering for Christ was a badge of honour.

The truth about suffering for the sake of the gospel

There is an element of shame attached to the preaching of the gospel.

Anyone who has attempted to share their faith will testify that it does not come naturally. There is always an element of fear attached to it. It is the fear of being rejected, ridiculed or even abused. Paul gives us the reason for this.

1 Corinthians 1:22-24 (NKJV) For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

The preaching of the gospel will produce three possible responses. The first one is a rejection that comes usually from religious mindsets that have preconceived ideas of God and seek after the Divine in a specific shape or form. Even if they are presented with the obvious, they reject truth simply on the basis that it doesn’t fit their criteria of divine truth. Jesus faced that with the religious leaders of his day.

Matthew 16:1 (NLT) One day the Pharisees and Sadducees came to test Jesus, demanding that he show them a miraculous sign from heaven to prove his authority.

They were asking Jesus for a sign in spite of the abundance of miracles that Jesus did right before their eyes. Jesus response was quite scathing.

Matthew 16:2-4 (NLT) He replied, "You know the saying, 'Red sky at night means fair weather tomorrow; red sky in the morning means foul weather all day.' You know how to interpret the weather signs in the sky, but you don't know how to interpret the signs of the times! Only an evil, adulterous generation would demand a miraculous sign, but the only sign I will give them is the sign of the prophet Jonah." Then Jesus left them and went away.

There are those who will never accept the truth even if it is plainly presented to them. They aren't seeking after truth, they are merely wanting to conform truth to fit into their evil intentions. The only response to that is to walk away.

The second response Paul speaks of are those who seemingly seek after wisdom. But the wisdom they seek for is the wisdom that makes sense to their human intellect. Any wisdom that is foreign to their senses is quickly rejected. The gospel will not be attractive to any of these two groups. To one it will be a stumbling block while to the other it will be foolishness.

There is however a third group of people who when hearing the gospel will find themselves not only attentive to Christ will be to them "the power of God and the wisdom of God". For this reason the gospel must be preached. There are many in that third group, ready as "white fields" are ready for the harvest. We must go. We must preach the gospel even though the element of shame is very present each time we do it.

The shame of the gospel is overcome by the power of the gospel.

Paul gives us the secret behind his unwavering commitment to preach the gospel. His preaching was always backed by the power of God.

1 Corinthians 2:4 (NLT) And my message and my preaching were very plain. Rather than using clever and persuasive speeches, I relied only on the power of the Holy Spirit.

1 Corinthians 4:20 (NLT) For the Kingdom of God is not just a lot of talk; it is living by God's power.

Romans 1:16 (NKJV) For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.

The Gospel that we preach must be the Gospel of power, not a Gospel of mere words. The only way we can overcome the seeming shame that is attached to the gospel is to ensure that the Gospel we preach is the Gospel preached by the early church – where signs and wonders followed the preaching of God's word.

The modern church has been influenced by mid 20th Century ideas of what constitutes the gospel. Scholars came up with the essentials that made up the gospel calling them the Kerygma. While attempting to preserve the essence of the gospel, they left out the fundamental component that differentiated the gospel from any other proclamation. The preaching of the gospel is always accompanied by signs and wonders. A blatant disregard for the supernatural because it is an offense to our modern day intellect has

created a version of the gospel that has “a form of godliness but denying its power”. The modern day gospel has the words without the power.

The Gospel of the book of Acts was the gospel of power. Beginning from the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost we see nothing but the miraculous everywhere the gospel was preached.

Acts 2:43 (NLT) A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders.

- Peter heals the lame man
- The striking of Annanias and Saphira
- Healings and deliverance in massive scale

Acts 5:12 (NLT) The apostles were performing many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers were meeting regularly at the Temple in the area known as Solomon’s Colonnade.

Acts 5:15-16 (NLT) As a result of the apostles’ work, sick people were brought out into the streets on beds and mats so that Peter’s shadow might fall across some of them as he went by. Crowds came from the villages around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those possessed by evil spirits, and they were all healed.

- Peter heals Aeneas who was paralysed for eight years
- Peter raises Dorcas from the dead
- Peter freed supernaturally from prison by an Angel
- King Herod smitten by God
- Paul opposes Elymas the sorcerer who is smitten blind
- Paul heals a cripple in Lystra
- Paul’s ministry explodes in the supernatural

Acts 19:11-12 (NLT) God gave Paul the power to perform unusual miracles. When handkerchiefs or aprons that had merely touched his skin were placed on sick people, they were healed of their diseases, and evil spirits were expelled.

It goes on and on. What is clear about the book of Acts is that the original gospel, when preached, was accompanied by the supernatural. God backed the early church with power from on high, each time they put themselves out there to preach Christ. No wonder the shame that was attached to the preaching of the gospel seemed so insignificant compared to lives that were transformed by it.

The gospel is the gospel of power. It is God manifesting himself in our midst. It is not a gospel of mere words. Just because we do not understand the miraculous. Just because it is not common today, does not give us the right to rewrite the Bible. We are obliged to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom. Yes, there is an element of shame attached to the gospel. We overcome that shame by demonstrating the gospel in all its power.

Every Christian is called to preach the gospel.

The shame of the gospel is overcome by the power of the gospel.

May we be among those who count themselves worthy to suffer shame for His name.