

Advancing The Gospel Through Suffering

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[0 : 00] What if I told you that your pain, your struggles, your moments of deepest hardship could be the very thing that God uses to bring others to Christ?

What if your suffering wasn't a sign of God's absence, but rather a powerful tool in his hands to advance his kingdom? This evening, we're going to explore how suffering, though deeply painful, can serve a purpose far beyond ourselves, and that purpose is advancing the gospel.

As we look at our passage, we'll see how suffering isn't just something to endure, it's something God uses for his glory. As we gather, we do so with a shared hope, a hope rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But we must also acknowledge that in our Christian walk, there are seasons of hardship. There are times when we feel the weight of suffering, the burdens of trial, and the pain of loss or difficulty.

These seasons of suffering can shake us, and at times we may even wonder, why is this happening to me? Where is God in all this?

[1 : 25] And yet, in the midst of our suffering, the word of God gives us the perspective that is radically different from the world's view. The world tells us that suffering is a curse, that it's something to be avoided at all costs, that it's something that diminishes us.

But the scriptures, and particularly Paul's words here in Philippians, show us that suffering, far from being something that hinders the gospel, can actually advance it.

Suffering can be a tool in the hands of God for spreading the good news of Jesus Christ, for encouraging believers, and for testifying to a world that is in desperate need of him.

Paul was not just a theoretical teacher of the gospel. He was a man who had lived it, a man who had suffered for it. In fact, at the time of writing this letter, Paul was under arrest, awaiting trial for the very faith that he had preached.

And yet, in the midst of his own suffering, Paul is not disheartened, and he's certainly not silent. Instead, he's writing to the Philippians to encourage them, to remind them that God is at work, even in suffering.

[2 : 49] Now, we need to remember the context of this letter, the letter to the Philippians. Paul had a special relationship with this church.

The church in Philippi was the first one he had founded in Europe during his missionary journeys, and would have held a dear place in his heart. They had supported him financially and spiritually, and they had stood by him through thick and thin.

But they, too, were facing struggles. Facing external opposition, the threat of persecution, and even internal conflicts.

And so Paul writes to encourage them, not simply to express his gratitude for their support, but to urge them to continue in their faith, to press on towards the goal, to endure with joy, and to see God's purposes, even in the midst of hardship.

So as we look at our passage this evening, we'll do so with the following headings. Firstly, we'll look at suffering as a witness to non-believers.

[4 : 04] Paul shows us that our suffering can serve as a witness to the world around us. When we face trials with faith, it demonstrates to a watching world that there is something more, something more to life than mere comfort or happiness.

It shows that we have the hope in Christ that transcends our circumstances. Secondly, we'll look at suffering as an encouragement to believers.

Paul shows us that suffering can serve as an encouragement to other believers. When we endure suffering with grace and confidence, we strengthen and embolden our fellow Christians to persevere in their own faith.

And thirdly, we'll look at suffering as God's sovereign plan. Paul shows us that God is in control. God has a purpose for everything, even in our pain.

So firstly, suffering as a witness to non-believers. Let's look again at verse 13. It has become known throughout the whole Imperial Guard, and to all the rest, that my imprisonment is for Christ.

[5 : 24] Paul's imprisonment, as we've already noted, is not the result of a regular criminal act. He has been arrested for the sake of the gospel.

He is suffering because of his faith in Jesus Christ, because he has boldly proclaimed the message of salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

And yet, in this very suffering, God is using Paul to spread the gospel. This is a powerful insight, one that radically changes the way we think about our own trials.

When we think about suffering, especially as Christians, we often consider it a burden, something to be avoided. Most of us don't go out of our way to experience hardship.

We want peace, health, comfort, and security. Those are natural desires, and there's nothing wrong with wanting to live a life free of unnecessary pain.

[6 : 29] But what we see in the Apostle Paul is a completely different way of thinking. Paul is not focused on the suffering itself, but on how God can use that suffering to further his kingdom.

Paul's imprisonment has become a witness to non-believers. It's not a witness in the way we might first think. Paul's not going door to door preaching the gospel to the jailers and the guards, though no doubt he perhaps did that too.

Rather, his very presence in prison, his steadfastness in faith, and his joy in Christ become a testimony to the power of the gospel.

Paul is being held by the Imperial Guard, the elite soldiers of the Roman Empire. These are not men of faith.

They were part of an empire that persecuted Christians and rejected the gospel. And yet, Paul's chains have become the vehicle through which they come to hear about Jesus Christ.

[7 : 41] As Paul says, my imprisonment is for Christ. His suffering is not pointless. It's not just an inconvenience.

It's a tool in God's hand to spread the gospel in places where it might not have gone otherwise. Let's pause for a moment and reflect on this.

Have you ever thought of your suffering as an opportunity for witness? I'll admit that in my own life, when I face difficulty, I often feel overwhelmed and discouraged.

I want the trial to end and I tend to focus on how it's affecting myself. But here, Paul shows us that suffering can be a platform for the gospel. It's not that we should go out looking for suffering, but rather, when it does come, we must see it through the lens of God's sovereign purposes.

How can God use this trial to point others to Christ? Consider this. When we, as Christians, face suffering and endure with faith and joy, it speaks volumes to the world around us.

[8 : 56] The world cannot understand how we can remain at peace, how we can have joy in the midst of hardship. This is one of the ways our suffering can act as a witness.

Let me give you an example from the early church. In the Roman Empire, Christians were often persecuted for their faith. They were thrown into arenas to be killed by wild animals.

They were burnt at stake and they were tortured in many other ways. Yet many of these early martyrs faced their death with calm and even joy.

They didn't curse their enemies. They didn't cry out in fear. Instead, they remained steadfast in their faith, proclaiming Christ even as they faced death.

One of the most famous examples is the martyrdom of Polycarp. He was an early Christian bishop of Smyrna. When he was brought before the Roman authorities in order to recant his faith, he refused.

[10 : 04] He was offered freedom if he would simply deny Christ. But Polycarp famously responded, eight and six years have I served him and he has done me no wrong.

How then can I blaspheme my king and savior? He was then burned at the stake singing hymns as the flames consumed him.

Now, why is this relevant to us? Because Polycarp suffering was a witness to the world around him. His death was a powerful testimony to the strength of his faith and to the reality of the gospel he had proclaimed.

The Roman authorities who witnessed his death were confronted with a faith that they could not deny. How could these Christians face such a painful death with such peace?

It wasn't human strength or willpower. It was the power of God at work in name. Their suffering pointed to a greater reality, the hope of the resurrection and eternal life with Christ Jesus.

[11 : 20] When we suffer with faith, we point to something the world doesn't understand, a peace that passes understanding, a joy that is not rooted in circumstances and a hope that is not bound by the temporary sufferings of this world.

This is the kind of witness Paul is giving in his imprisonment and it's the kind of witness that we are called to give. But let's make this more personal.

As we face struggles in our own lives, whether it's in our health, in our work, in our relationships, how are we responding? Are we responding with bitterness, anger or hopelessness?

Or are we responding with faith, joy and trust in God's sovereignty? When we face suffering, do we allow our trials to drive us closer to Christ or do we become discouraged and turn inwards?

Here's the key point. Our response to suffering, how we face trials and hardship, is often the loudest sermon we will ever preach.

[12 : 37] People are watching us. Non-believers are watching us. They are observing how we respond when life doesn't go as planned. And through our endurance, through our faith, through our joy in Christ, even in the midst of suffering, we have an opportunity to point them to Jesus.

So let's think about this for a moment in practical terms. In your workplace, in your community, in your family, when difficulties arise, do you react differently from the world?

Do you have a peace that confounds others? When others see you enduring hardship with faith, do they ask, what is it about you that's different?

How can you remain so calm? How can you still have hope? And in those moments, we have the opportunity to share the gospel with them, we have the opportunity to point them to the hope that we have in Christ.

We may not be sitting in a Roman prison, but God has placed you where you are for a reason. He has placed you in your family, in your job, in your community, so that you might be a witness to the gospel.

[14 : 02] people. And often, it's in the moments of greatest weakness when we are suffering that the light of Christ shines the brightest.

So as we reflect on Paul's words here, let us ask ourselves, how can we use our suffering as a witness? How can we glorify Christ in our trials?

How can we point others to him in our weakest moments? But Paul does not just teach us that suffering is a witness to non-believers, it is also an encouragement to fellow believers.

In verse 14, we read, And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

In this verse, Paul reveals an incredible truth.

[15 : 03] His suffering is not just impacting non-believers, it's also having a profound effect on his fellow Christians. His imprisonment has encouraged the believers in Rome, and more than that, it has emboldened them to speak the word of God with even greater boldness and confidence.

The example of Paul's steadfast faith in the midst of trial has served to inspire other Christians to stand firm in their own faith and to share the gospel with greater courage.

Now, we might not immediately think of suffering as something that can encourage others. After all, we're going through difficult times, we often feel that we need to hide our struggles.

We don't want to burden other people with them. We might feel embarrassed even, or we wonder how others could possibly be helped by our pain.

But Paul shows us here that our trials, when faced with faith and joy, can actually strengthen the faith of other believers. We see this principle throughout the New Testament.

[16 : 17] For example, in 2 Corinthians 1, verses 3 and 4, Paul writes, Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

Here, Paul explains that God comforts us in our afflictions, not only for our own benefit, but so that we can then comfort others who are suffering. In other words, our suffering is not wasted.

God uses it to prepare us to encourage others in their walk with him. This is one of the paradoxes of the Christian life. God does not waste our pain.

Instead, he redeems it, using it to strengthen others in their faith. So how does this encouragement work in practical terms?

First, notice that Paul's response to suffering emboldens the believers around him. They are encouraged by Paul's faithfulness, by his unwavering commitment to Christ, despite the hardship.

[17 : 36] Paul is not whining, complaining, or asking for sympathy. He is not turning inwards or abandoning his mission. Instead, he is continuing to preach the gospel, even from prison, and this strengthens the hearts of those around him.

His courage in the face of adversity encourages them to press on, to speak out, and to share the gospel more boldly. God's love.

This is an important lesson for us today. In our Christian communities, whether in the church, or families, or our friendships, our response to suffering have a ripple effect.

When we endure hardship with faith, we model for others how to live out their faith in difficult times. Our perseverance becomes a testimony to others of God's sustaining grace, and it encourages them to follow suit.

Think about it. How many times have you been encouraged by someone else's example of faith? Maybe you've witnessed a fellow believer go through a difficult season, and instead of giving in to despair, they've held on to the Lord, trusting in his promises.

[19 : 00] Maybe they've continued to serve in the church, to love others, or even to speak about the hope they have in Christ, even in the midst of deep sorrow or loss.

That kind of faith is contagious. It reminds us that we are not alone in our struggles, and it encourages us to keep going, to trust God, and to press on towards the goal.

This is exactly what Paul is doing here. He's showing the Philippians and us that suffering doesn't have to paralyze us. It doesn't have to silence us.

Instead, it can be a source of strength, for others. Our witness and suffering can be a profound source of encouragement to our fellow believers, especially when they face their own struggles.

But I feel I should pause here for a moment to offer an important reminder. We must not try to bear these burdens in our own strength. It's easy for us to think that the key to be an encouragement to others in our suffering is to always appear strong, to always appear composed and in control.

[20 : 20] We might think, if I can just keep it together, if I can just suffer with grace, I'll be able to encourage others. But this is not the gospel way of enduring suffering.

The Bible teaches us that we are weak, and it is in our weakness that God's strength is made perfect. When we try to carry our own burdens in our own strength, we are setting ourselves up for failure.

And even worse, it can lead to self-condemnation. Sometimes when we don't handle our suffering as we think we should, perhaps we're getting angry or frustrated, or we're feeling hopeless, we can beat ourselves up.

We think we are failing God, or that we aren't worthy to encourage others. But this is not the gospel. The gospel tells us that Christ is sufficient for us in our weakness.

His grace is sufficient. His strength is perfected in our weaknesses. Remember that when Paul writes about suffering, he's not suggesting that we will always handle it perfectly.

[21 : 33] He's not saying that we should pretend we don't feel the weight of it. Paul himself cries out to God for relief from his own suffering. He asked God three times to remove the thorn in his flesh.

And God responded, not by taking that thorn away, but by giving Paul the strength to endure. This is where we must place our trust.

not in our own ability to suffer well, but in God's ability to work through our suffering. It's okay to not be okay, as they say.

It's okay to admit that you don't have all the answers, or that you don't always handle suffering very well. But we can rely on God's strength, knowing he will use our weakness to show others the power of his grace.

So when you are suffering, do not feel that you have to put on a brave face, or that you have to be strong for others in your own strength. Rest in God's strength.

[22 : 43] Ask God for help, and rely on his grace to endure. And remember that even in your moments of weakness, God can use you to encourage others.

It's not your perfection that encourages others. It's the presence of God's grace in your life, even in the midst of brokenness. Your authenticity, your willingness to lean on God, and your trust in his sovereignty will encourage others far more than any display of strength or control.

Let's remember that our encouragement to others is not about showing them that we can handle everything on our own. Rather, it's about showing them that God is faithful, that he sustains us, and that his grace is more than sufficient for our time of need.

I humbly hope that my own testimony last week was an encouragement to some of you. And I may be asked that you'd consider if you might be willing to share your own story.

And this is my story, this is my song that Thomas is doing for Sulaythorn in the evening service. So I would encourage you to share that, to speak to Thomas.

[24 : 09] If you feel that that would be useful. Finally, let's return to verse 12.

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. In this verse, Paul gives us the key to understanding suffering.

It is all part of God's sovereign plan. As we look into these words, we see that Paul is not viewing his imprisonment as some unfortunate event that simply just happened or a mistake in the grand scheme of things.

Paul is not despairing or complaining about his circumstances. Instead, he declares something profoundly powerful. His suffering has served to advance the gospel.

This is an extraordinary perspective. Paul is seeing beyond immediate pain and difficulty, understanding that in God's providence, even imprisonment serves a purpose far greater than himself.

[25 : 21] Paul was not suffering randomly, nor was it a meaningless, arbitrary event. His imprisonment was a divinely appointed tool for advancing the gospel of Christ.

Christ. This is a deep theological truth that we must grasp if we are to fully understand how suffering can advance the gospel in our own lives.

So let's pause here for a moment and reflect on what this means for us. Suffering is never random.

Whether it's the heavy burden of illness, the loss of a loved one, personal trials, or even suffering for the sake of the gospel, nothing is outside of God's sovereign will.

In times of suffering, we may struggle to see how pain fits into the bigger picture, but we must remember that God's sovereignty is not limited by our understanding.

[26 : 28] He is always at work, even when we cannot see it for ourselves. Sometimes for us, it's only in retrospect that we catch a glimpse of how God has used our suffering.

In the moment, trials can seem senseless, overwhelming, or even cruel. But later, when we look back, we can see his hand at work.

I don't want to tell my wife Anne-Marie's story for her, but this past week, she had the opportunity to share her testimony at Finders. Hearing this from her again as I was preparing the sermon, it was clear to see how Anne-Marie had to endure suffering that would not have made any sense at all to her at the time.

But in retrospect, it's clear to see God's hand at work. God was using even the hardest moments to bring her to himself. In the same way, we may not understand what God is doing in our suffering, but we can trust that he is working out his perfect plan, even when we cannot yet see it.

Paul's declaration here that his suffering is advancing the gospel challenges our natural reaction to suffering. When we face difficulty, it's easy to feel overwhelmed, or even to feel forgotten by God.

- [28 : 03] We might ask ourselves questions like, why me? Why this? Where is God in my pain? These questions are normal, and the struggle of suffering can make us feel as though everything is falling apart.

But what Paul is teaching us is this. God uses suffering for his good purposes. Even when we don't fully understand the reason behind our pain, we can trust in the truth that God is sovereign, and his purposes are being fulfilled, even through our suffering.

Think of the story of Joseph in the Old Testament. Joseph was sold by his brothers into slavery, falsely accused of a crime, thrown into prison.

For years, Joseph endured hardship, and yet in the midst of that suffering, he was able to see God's hand at work. He later said to his brothers, after they feared that he would have revenge on them for selling him into slavery.

You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good. Joseph didn't waste years in despair, even though his suffering was intense.

- [29 : 22] He understood that his pain wasn't in vain. It was used by God to accomplish his perfect plan. It was through Joseph's suffering that God saved the lives of many, including his family, during the famine.

Joseph's suffering was woven into God's sovereign plan, and in the end, God's glory was revealed in the saving of many lives.

In the same way, our suffering is not wasted. It's not meaningless. It may not always be easy to see in the moment, but God is using it for his glory and for the advancement of his kingdom.

We are often too short-sighted in our suffering. We want immediate answers and quick relief. But we must remember that God's timeline is different from our own.

Our sufferings might not end immediately, and it may not end in the way we expect or want. But we can rest in the assurance that God is working through it, again, even if we cannot see that full picture.

- [30 : 31] We can also take comfort in the truth that God never wastes our suffering. We see this most fully in how God used the suffering of his Son, Jesus Christ.

Christ endured the most intense suffering anyone could imagine. Yet his suffering brought about the greatest good in all of history, the salvation of sinners.

Through his suffering, we find hope. Through his wounds, we are healed. Similarly, God also uses our suffering to bring about something far greater than we can understand.

When we suffer, we are not alone. Christ himself knows what it means to suffer. He walked the path of suffering, and he is with us in our suffering.

We can go to him in our pain, knowing that he fully understands. And just as he uses his suffering to bring about salvation, he can use our suffering to advance his kingdom.

- [31 : 43] As we think about suffering, it's crucial to remember that it's not only part of God's sovereign plan, but it's also part of his refining process in our lives. We see through Scripture that God often uses suffering as a means to purify us, to draw us nearer to him, and to help us grow in our faith.

Suffering builds endurance. It teaches us to rely on God more fully, to trust in his promises, and to cling to the hope that we have in Christ.

We are often so focused on our own comfort and instant gratification that we miss the greater reality. God is using our suffering to bring others to Christ.

This is why Paul could say with confidence that his imprisonment was serving to advance the gospel. He was beyond his own personal pain and recognising God's plan.

Paul didn't see himself as a victim of his circumstances. He saw himself as an instrument in God's hands. This is something we must strive for and to adopt in our own lives.

[33 : 01] When we are suffering, we need to remember that God is working through our pain. Our suffering is not in vain, and God is using it for his glory and the advancement of the kingdom.

Even when we cannot understand what we are going through, we can trust that God is sovereign, and his plan is perfect.

We may never fully understand why we suffer in this life, but we can trust that God is using it. And in that trust, we can find peace, we can find hope, and we can find the courage to face suffering with a gospel-centred perspective, knowing that God is using even our deepest pain to further his glorious kingdom.

So as we come to a close, let me summarise these three powerful truths that we've seen from these verses in Philippians. These truths will not only help us to understand the role of suffering in the Christian life, but will also encourage and strengthen us as we face our own struggles.

So firstly, we have seen that suffering can be a witness to non-believers. When we endure hardship with faith, our lives become a testimony to the watching world.

[34 : 24] Our response to suffering speaks volumes. In a world that often tries to avoid pain at all costs, when people see us face difficulty with grace, peace, and confidence in Christ, it stands out.

Our faith shines brightest when we walk through the storms of life with our eyes fixed on Jesus. As Paul's experience in prison shows us, suffering can be the very thing that opens doors to proclaim the gospel.

It may even cause non-believers to take notice and ask, how can you have hope in the midst of such pain? And it is in that moment that we have the opportunity to point them to Christ.

Secondly, we've seen that suffering encourages fellow believers. We see this in Paul's letter as he rejoices that his imprisonment has encouraged other Christians to be bold in sharing their faith.

As we endure trials with endurance and faith, we become living examples of what it looks like to trust God in difficult times.

[35 : 34] Our perseverance is an encouragement to those around us. Our strength, not in ourselves, but in Christ, can embolden others to live more courageously.

Don't underestimate the impact your example of suffering can have on those around you. Even when we feel weak or unworthy, our reliance on God during times of hardship can be the encouragement that someone else needs to keep going in their own journey of faith.

And finally, we have seen that suffering is part of God's sovereign plan. This is perhaps the most important truth for us to hold on to. As we see in Paul's words, nothing happens by accident.

God is in control. He has a purpose in everything, even in our pain. Though we may not always understand it, we can rest in assurance that our suffering is never in vain.

God is using it, as he did with Paul, to advance his kingdom. And accomplish his greater purposes. Suffering refines us, draws us closer to Christ, and equips us to be instruments in his hand.

[36 : 54] And again, even when we can't see the full picture, we can trust that God is at work in ways that we cannot comprehend. So as we face our own trials, may we be people who view suffering differently to the rest of the world.

Let us not see it as something to be avoided at all costs, but an opportunity. An opportunity to advance the gospel. An opportunity to encourage one another.

An opportunity to trust in God's perfect, sovereign plan. May we remember that God uses suffering for his glory and our good.

And may this truth shape how we face trials in our life. As the church of Christ, let us stand firm in these truths and live them out in our daily lives, knowing that in all things, God is working for our good and his glory.

May we walk forward with confidence, even in the midst of suffering, because we know that he is with us and he is using our pain for a purpose far greater than we can see.

[38 : 07] Amen.