

SUFFERING AND SMILING!

Today's Text: 2 Cor. 4: 7-18

Extracts:

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. *We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not destroyed- always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body....Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day* [for] we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal [2 Cor. 4: 7-9, 16-18]

Dr. Deborah Cohan is an obstetrician-gynaecologist and a mother of two.¹ On Tuesday, 5th November 2013, she was scheduled to go into surgery to have her two breasts removed (double mastectomy) at the University of California San Francisco (UCSF) Medical Center. Before going into surgery, she invited the medical team (doctors and nurses) to dance with her in the operating room. They all danced to Beyoncé's "Get Me Bodied" which Cohan posted on YouTube. In no time, it went viral, drawing over 250,000 viewers. On the site where she posted the six-minute video, Dr. Cohan had created a page called "Deborah's Healing Journey" where she wrote, "Nothing brings me greater joy than catalyzing others [family and friends] to dance, move, be in their bodies." She was discharged from hospital the following day.

Deborah was about to lose a very precious part of her female anatomy. Her healing had been a journey of pains and suffering. Rather than be sad and imagining what could go wrong during the surgery, she danced! She was suffering and smiling, so to speak. Can you do that? Right now, you are under severe pressure. It may have to do with financial hardship, a medical problem or a family crisis. Deep down inside you, there is a gnawing feeling that refuses to go away. Can you smile over it? Can you overcome it before it wears you out? In this week's Bible verses, Paul encouraged believers in the church at Corinth not to be cast down or crushed, no matter how hard pressed on every side they might be. There is something in his words of comfort that we all need for our discouraging circumstances. Let us find out more from this week's study.

¹ Story is based on Jareen Imam, CNN, "Double mastectomy patient throws dance party in OR," November 8, 2013; <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/11/07/health/irpt-surgery-dance-party/index.html>

1. Background: Paul suffered but he kept smiling!

Let us go on an imaginary journey to the inner prison at Philippi some two thousand years ago. We have come face-to-face with two prisoners, Paul and Silas, who had their feet fastened in the stocks [Acts 16: 24]. Being placed in the stocks was a very painful experience [cf: Jer. 20: 2]. In those days, they would firmly secure the victim's head, hands and feet in holes cut in a single piece of wood. In the case of Paul and Silas, it was their feet that had been fastened to the stocks.

What was their offence? Paul had cast out a demon from a certain girl used by fortune-tellers to make money. Having thereby lost their source of big business, the people seized Paul and his missionary companion, Silas, dragged them before the authorities and alleged (falsely, of course) that the two men, being Jews, exceedingly troubled their city and taught customs that they, as Romans, were not obliged to receive or observe. The magistrates commanded them to be stripped of their clothes and to be beaten with rods. Many stripes were laid on them before they were thrown into maximum security jail. Paul and Silas were in terrible pains- from false accusations, from the beatings and from the ordeal as they were securely fastened to the stocks. But what was their reaction to their suffering? At midnight, they "were praying and singing hymns to God, and the [other] prisoners were listening to them" [Acts 16: 16-25]. They were suffering and smiling!

Let us face some realities. Hardship is painful. We see good and bad people suffer pain alike. We see some people get out of it but some others never do. We do not all have the same threshold level to deal with it. Yet, the word of God says, "If you faint in the day of adversity, your strength is small" [Prov. 24: 10]. How then, as believers, can we handle suffering and triumph over it? That is the question that we shall attempt to answer in this week's Bible study.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul set out some principles that lent credibility to his own ministry. One of them is coping with suffering, the subject of our study this week. Here are the key points to note from Paul's message:

a) *Pressures will always be there*

Paul wrote, "We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair" [2 Cor. 4: 8]. *The pressures on us do not come singly or from one direction. Some come by virtue of our gender, colour or creed. Some are self-inflicted- by greed or lust!* We are always comparing ourselves with other people that we use as our benchmarks of success. We are in a race with time- to beat existing records or to set new ones. We want to run faster or jump higher or dive deeper- literally and figuratively at the same time. As the pressures mount, we soon discover

that our wants are unlimited whereas our means are always inadequate. We end up with sleepless nights, anxieties and high blood pressure! Solomon was the richest man that ever lived. He was so rich that he “made silver as common in Jerusalem as stones.” All his drinking vessels were gold [1 Kgs 10: 21-27]. He had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines [1 Kgs 11: 3]! Yet, he was going to tell us, “He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver; nor he who loves abundance, with increase... The abundance of the rich will not permit him to sleep” [Eccl. 5: 10, 12]. Therefore, *our pressures do not come only from lack but also from too much. So, an important point to note is that we do not know what satisfies us until we know whose definition of success we are using.* When you are hard pressed on every side and you do not want to be crushed, optimism may not be enough. Will power may not cut it. There has to be a better way!

b) *There will always be persecution*

Paul added, “[We are] persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed- always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus always may be manifested in our mortal flesh” [2 Cor. 4: 9-10]. *We are under persecution when we suffer for what we believe in. However, it is not everything that we believe in that edifies.*

In Paul’s case, he suffered because of his faith in Jesus the Christ and “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” [2 Tim. 3: 12]. Therefore, Paul could always count on Jesus to save him from his moments of suffering. Nevertheless, there are people who are persecuted for promoting or condoning controversial causes, such as gay and abortion rights, corruption by public officials, etc. Can we smile if we find ourselves in such circumstances?

c) *Nevertheless, we must never lose heart*

Paul assured his readers, “Therefore, we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day” [2 Cor. 4: 16]. Here lies the key to our ability to suffer and still smile. The outward man is our physical/natural self; the inward man is our spiritual self. The only way that we can be suffering and still be smiling is our focus on the eternal. Paul lays it out clearly as follows [vv. 17-18]:

For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

Here is what Paul is telling us: *when you know where you are going, the distance no longer matters*. Here is a catalogue of Paul's sufferings, among others [2 Cor. 11: 24-27]:

- He received thirty-nine stripes five times;
- He was beaten with rods three times and stoned once;
- He was shipwrecked three times;
- He faced perils of water, robbers on land, at sea, in the city and in the wilderness; and
- He often suffered sleeplessness, hunger and thirst

He was able to bear all such sufferings because he knew that the God he served would deliver him out of them all and He did [2 Tim. 3: 10-11]. Therefore, *knowing why we are suffering is a good pointer to our ability to cope with it*.

2. Know why you are suffering

According to an African proverb, the snake seen by one person is always longer than the stick with which it is compared. In like manner, no two people will have the same story about their personal ordeals in life. Nevertheless, we can have an idea of why we are suffering. If we know that, then, we can take steps to deal with it or how to move on. The following suffering situations are commonly found:

a) *Some of us are under condemnation*

There are some people who do not fear or obey God. On the surface, they look okay and lack nothing. They have access to the best material things that money can buy. But deep down, they know that they are suffering in that they are not happy. They know how to get out of their situation but they cannot/do not want to because they have seared consciences. Such people have departed from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, "speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their conscience seared with a hot iron" [1 Tim. 4: 1-2]. Such people are living in self-deception and are in danger of condemnation.

The Psalmist found himself envious of such people when he saw the prosperity of the wicked. They did not seem to be in trouble nor were they plagued as other men. Pride served as their necklace. They set their mouths against the heavens and spoke disdainfully of the Most High. But when he went into the sanctuary of God, he understood their end: God had already set them on slippery slopes and cast them to destruction [Ps. 73: 1-18].

Those who find themselves living in sin which they do not want to give up because of its material or spiritual reward are under condemnation. They risk being given up by God as reprobate minds [Rom. 1:18-32].

They are suffering without realizing it. However, if they confess their sins and return to a true communion with God, they will be forgiven. They may still suffer the repercussions of their past lives but they will now be suffering and smiling. Otherwise, they are living on borrowed time.

b) *Some of us are facing the consequences of disobedience*

Every sin has its consequences, even after the offender has been forgiven. For example, an adulterer who gets infected with HIV/AIDS will be forgiven when s(he) truly confesses the sin. But the suffering from that infection will remain. Take the case of David. He was the man after God's own heart [1 Sam. 13: 13-14]. But after he was crowned king of Israel, he committed adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of one of his soldiers, and she got pregnant. To cover it all up, he sent her husband to the war front where he was killed. Then David married Bathsheba [2 Sam. 11: 1-27]. God sent a prophet to rebuke the king for his moral failure. Even though he confessed his sins [the now famous Psalm 51], God still punished David very severely. The product (son) of the adulterous affair died and the sword never departed from David's house [2 Sam. 1-14]. Incest, murder and rebellion plagued his family for the rest of his life. Nevertheless, David's successor, Solomon, was the son born to David and Bathsheba after the death of the child of adultery! David suffered but he smiled because he had repented.

So, if you find that your suffering on a particular issue is not going away, do an audit of your relationship with God. Confess your sins and ask for His forgiveness in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ. He will forgive and restore you.

c) *Our faith may be on trial*

Sometimes, we may not know why we are passing through tribulations, especially when we know that we have a good relationship with God. In such circumstances, it is important to realize that we could be going through *a spiritual pruning process* because God chastens us for our own benefit. Such chastening does not seem "joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" [Heb. 12: 3-11].

Job did nothing wrong. He was said to be "blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil." On a day that the sons of God presented themselves before God, Satan was among them. God asked him where he had been and he said that he had been roaming the earth. God asked him, "Have you considered My servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and

shuns evil?” Satan asked God if Job feared Him for nothing. Had God not made a hedge of protection around him and his household and blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions increased in the land? He challenged God to remove His band of protection from Job and see if he would not curse Him to His face. Satan obtained God’s permission to test Job’s faith. Within a week, he lost all his seven sons and material wealth. He became destitute. But what was Job’s reaction? He fell down and worshipped God, saying, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” [Job 1: 1- 21]. Over time, things got worse. His prosperity had passed like a cloud; his bones burnt with fever and his gnawing pains took no rest [Job 30: 15-30]. Yet, he kept his faith. In the end, God restored him with a double portion of his lost blessings [Job 42: 10-16]. The patient Job has become the role model for all suffering believers.

In sum, the key to coping with suffering is your faith in your God. He is bigger than any problem- physical, psychological or spiritual- that you can ever face. So, why are you not smiling through those hardships, trials or tribulations that are currently challenging you?

3. Conclusion: Focus on the eternal not temporary

At the height of his suffering, Job said, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God” [Job 19: 25-26]. That was long before the Redeemer came in flesh as Jesus the Christ. Paul added, “Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal” [2 Cor. 4: 17-18]. That was after Jesus had ascended to heaven. Both Job and Paul, well known for their ability to cope with suffering, have given us the key to their success: *looking up to Jesus, our Redeemer, the author and finisher of our faith* [Heb. 12:2].

Your suffering may be long, debilitating or life-threatening. But be careful to whose drum beat you are dancing. The pain and shame, the stress and distress, and more; they are all temporary and distracting. So are solutions anchored on tears, anger and resignation which are but temporary and unsatisfactory. Therefore, *learn to focus on the end results- victory, vindication and validation soon, and salvation ultimately*. So, rejoice evermore; pray without ceasing; in everything, give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you [1 Thes. 5: 16-18].

Are you suffering? Smile!