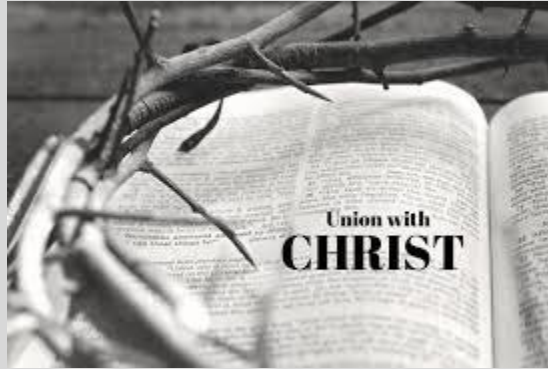


UNION WITH CHRIST: SHARING IN HIS SUFFERINGS

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I have for several years experienced an oppression that is foreign to my experience throughout most of my life. This sense of oppression seems to be greater in the mornings, though at times it has lasted for one or more days. There have been days when I have laid in bed all day because I was not able to face the day. It began a year or so after we moved to Arkansas at the distinct leading of the Lord. Within a month of coming to Arkansas we had to leave the ministry for which we had left everything to be a part. It was painful to say the least. After being in and out of a couple of home groups, they imploded, and we were on our own. This brought on just about a decade of periodic depression and oppression. As I have gone to the Lord regarding this, I have explored every possibility that I can imagine. My first thought was that there must be something within me that must be dealt with—sin, or resistance to His leading, or possibly even unforgiveness. Perhaps I was mistaken in believing that the Lord had called us to Arkansas? We must, of course, always walk in humility, confessing our sins whenever and wherever we are aware of such conditions in our lives. In my case, I was grasping at straws, desperately wanting to know what was causing this. If there was something in my life that I was not aware of, I wanted God to reveal that to me. After over a year of coming before the Lord regarding all of these possibilities, however, I received a mild rebuke. It was like God was getting tired of me always coming before Him in this way. He asked me if I could be content in the midst of this?

Finally satisfied that this oppression was not because of sin or unforgiveness in my life, I came to the conclusion that it must be some sort of demonic attack. I reasoned that the enemy was threatened by the journey of faith that I was on, and this oppression was a spiritual attack designed to discourage me in my walk. We know, of course, that Satan is the enemy of our soul and of our spirit. So I began speaking words of faith, renouncing all fears and anxieties that seemed to be associated with this depression. This I did for several years. The sense of being overwhelmed by fear and anxiety that comes with such oppression remained. Needless to say, I was getting rather discouraged as I was now approaching a decade of this darkness that seemed to be engulfing me.

I then took note of others who were experiencing a similar oppression, including my wife and others with whom I was in fairly close contact. I went so far as to mention it to a brother on the very first phone conversation that I had with him—something I would normally never do before I developed a trusting relationship with someone. He acknowledged that he was experiencing the same thing and confessed that there were mornings that he did not want to even get out of bed. As a result of learning of these experiences in others, I am now in the process of a *repentance*—a metanoia, or “paradigm change”—regarding this heaviness which has felt like such a curse over these several years. This paradigm change can be summed up in a word that was spoken by a fellow traveler who was experiencing a similar heaviness: “This is God’s heart.”

God’s Heavy Heart

Most of us who have grown up in the church have a rather sterilized view of God. We have been fed an idea of a transcendent God who is in control of the universe, much like a distant father who, while He may be taking care of His creation, is emotionally distant. At a practical level, our understanding of God has more closely resembled the deistic understanding, which essentially sees God as a giant clock maker who formed His creation, wound it up, set into place certain universal and eternal laws, and sits back and watches it keep perfect time. We know that God is much more intimately involved with His creation, of course, but at the practical, day-to-day level most of us do not have a real appreciation for

the way in which God's heart is moved—emotionally—by the circumstances in which we all find ourselves. Insofar as we do give thought to God's emotional side, we typically think of His anger. Truly, He is capable of anger, and this was displayed on any number of occasions throughout the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament accounts of the desert journey of the children of Israel.

God's heart is full of deep and varied emotions for His creation. We are told that God looked upon His creation and saw that it was good. He was *pleased* with what He saw. Then, we are given a glimpse into the sorrow that God experienced when Eve and then Adam ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. He asked them, already knowing the answer to the question, "Why are you hiding?" One can almost feel the grief in God's heart as He asked this question. Countless times throughout the Old Testament account, we encounter the heavy heart of God, sometimes expressed as anger, sometimes as deep grief, and often through actions that had to break His heart. We see God's heart most poignantly expressed in His conversation with Jeremiah:

When Josiah was king of Judah, the LORD said to me, "Jeremiah, you have no doubt seen what wayward Israel has done. You have seen how she went up to every high hill and under every green tree to give herself like a prostitute to other gods. Yet even after she had done all that, I thought that she might come back to me. But she did not. Her sister, unfaithful Judah, saw what she did. She also saw that I gave wayward Israel her divorce papers and sent her away because of her adulterous worship of other gods. Even after her unfaithful sister Judah had seen this, she still was not afraid, and she too went and gave herself like a prostitute to other gods. Because she took her prostitution so lightly, she defiled the land through her adulterous worship of gods made of wood and stone. In spite of all this, Israel's sister, unfaithful Judah, has not turned back to me with any sincerity; she has only pretended to do so," says the LORD. (Jeremiah 3:6-10; NET).

Anyone who has experienced the pain of divorce can appreciate more than most the deep pain that God was experiencing as He looked upon his bride who had so betrayed Him. Indeed, Jeremiah himself shared in God's heavy heart:

Thou didst say, Woe is me now! For the LORD hath added grief to my sorrow; I fainted in my sighing, and I find no rest (Jeremiah 45:3).

God's heavy heart is also expressed in the New Testament. Jesus Himself expressed it when He looked upon the state of affairs among the religious elite and as He was considering what lay before Him:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you! How often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would have none of it! (Luke 13:34; NET).

Can we imagine the pain that God experiences today? Not only do we live in a world that has rejected Him, but those who claim His name have, like the Israelites of old, found it much more convenient to "intermarry" with the pagan culture around them. The pain that God is experiencing must be excruciating.

There is, however, a people whom He has called out from among the apostate crowd. He has called them apart to suffer with Him, to experience the excruciating pain of an unfaithful wife. He has called them to a place of union with Him, to experience His pain as He and we together groan for the redemption of His creation.

Union with Christ

Over the past several weeks I have found myself sharing with the Lord my desire to come into greater union with Him. I would bring to mind the verses in scripture that spoke of this union. Paul, for example, declared,

[Even] the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints: To whom God would make known what [is] the riches of the glory of this mystery

*among the Gentiles; **which is Christ in you, the hope of glory***
(Colossians 1:27-27; emphasis mine).

As I prayed, I was brought up short as I realized there was no “greater” or “lesser” union: union is union. Either I was in union with Christ or I was not. Either Christ was in me or He was not. The great revelation then dawned upon me that I WAS in union with Christ! It was a matter of walking in the conscious reality of that union. The desire of my heart was to come into such a blissful peace and sense of invincible overcoming power that nothing that could come against me would phase me. I was not imagining that this union would come in the form of this heaviness that I was experiencing. It was when I heard that Word that resonated in my spirit to be the word of the Lord—*“This is God’s heart”*—that I realized that this oppression and depression that I was experiencing was actually the very expression and reflection of my union with Christ. Might this be the dark passageway to the light-filled glorified resurrection that all creation is groaning for?

I make myself vulnerable in sharing so personally because I believe that there are many on this journey who are experiencing this, what we might call the “dark side” of God’s heart. It doesn’t feel good, but friends, we must remember that this is an incredible privilege. Paul shares this understanding in his letter to the Philippians:

*Don't be intimidated in any way by your enemies. This will be a sign to them that they are going to be destroyed, but that you are going to be saved, even by God himself. **For you have been given not only the privilege of trusting in Christ but also the privilege of suffering for him*** (Philippians 1:28-29; emphasis added).

Those of us who have been called apart as forerunners of that which is to come, as we have become joined to Christ, are privileged to join Him in His suffering just as He endured it for the glory that was set before Him. We too will share in that glory as we share with Him in His sufferings. Paul’s crowning statement regarding this privilege that we share can be found in his letter to the Romans:

*For all those led by God's Spirit are God's sons. You did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear. Instead, you received the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father! " **The Spirit himself testifies together with our spirit that we are God's children, and if children, also heirs -- heirs of God and coheirs with Christ -- if indeed we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.** For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is going to be revealed to us. For the creation eagerly waits with anticipation for God's sons to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to futility -- not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it -- in the hope that the creation itself will also be set free from the bondage to decay into the glorious freedom of God's children. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together with labor pains until now. Not only that, but we ourselves who have the Spirit as the first fruits—we also groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. (Romans 8:14-23; CSB; emphasis added).*

These ten verses provide a more compelling and eloquent theology for the suffering of those of us who have been called apart into union with Christ than volumes of theological treatises by all of academically-trained theologians combined. We are experiencing the very groaning of God's heart for the redemption of His creation.

When Paul speaks of sharing in His suffering, we naturally assume that he is speaking of suffering physically. Indeed, Paul did suffer physically, and he has recounted that suffering in more than one of his letters. There are some, even many, who have been called to suffer with Christ in this way. Others have been called to suffer persecution of all sorts, including financial attacks, community isolation and besmirching of one's character. This too is suffering with Christ when this suffering is the result of our faithful obedience to Him.

I want to suggest that the oppression and the darkness that many of us on this journey of sonship are experiencing is also sharing in His sufferings. It is not so

readily recognized as such. In fact, it appears to us to be a weakness of our own character that we should so easily feel overwhelmed at the circumstances surrounding us. Others do not understand, and counsel us to “just quit feeling sorry for yourself.” I must admit that I have said these very words to myself and to others. It is often difficult to discern the source of our dark feelings, and we are naturally prone to identify them either as weakness of our character or as an attack from the adversary. Those of us who are on this walk of maturing into God’s sons, however, are being called to share His heart and thereby to share in His sufferings in whatever way that He would share them with us. Isaiah (53:3) spoke of the Christ who was to come,

He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were [our] faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

I cannot imagine the heaviness of heart that Jesus felt at the condition of the world around him, including and especially the religious world which rejected Him to the point of insisting He be subjected to a criminal’s death. The world—yes, even the religious world—continues to reject Him, crucify Him, and replace Him with all manner of religious activity and its own version of phylacteries and decrees which effectively put to death the Christ within Who has called us to radical obedience to Himself. How He agonizes over this state of affairs! Friends, we have been chosen to share in the heaviness of His heart as He along with us, groans for the redemption of His creation.

I want to suggest to those who have been experiencing this heaviness of heart, this heaviness that sometimes leaves you crippled and even paralyzed by the overwhelming darkness that you are experiencing—you are incredibly honored that God would choose to share with you some of His darkest but most intimate emotions. You are being brought into His most inner counsel as you share the pain of His own heart. Be encouraged that your suffering, while maybe not recognized by others—even spiritual brothers and sisters—is being used by God to bring forth His ultimate purposes through Christ Jesus the Head and through us, His body. I challenge you to ask the Lord, as you pass through the valley of

death, how you might minister to His heart and carry it valiantly for His glory. He alone is worthy of such an honor.