



STRUCK DOWN
BUT UNCONQUERED

SUFFERING **FOR CHRIST**

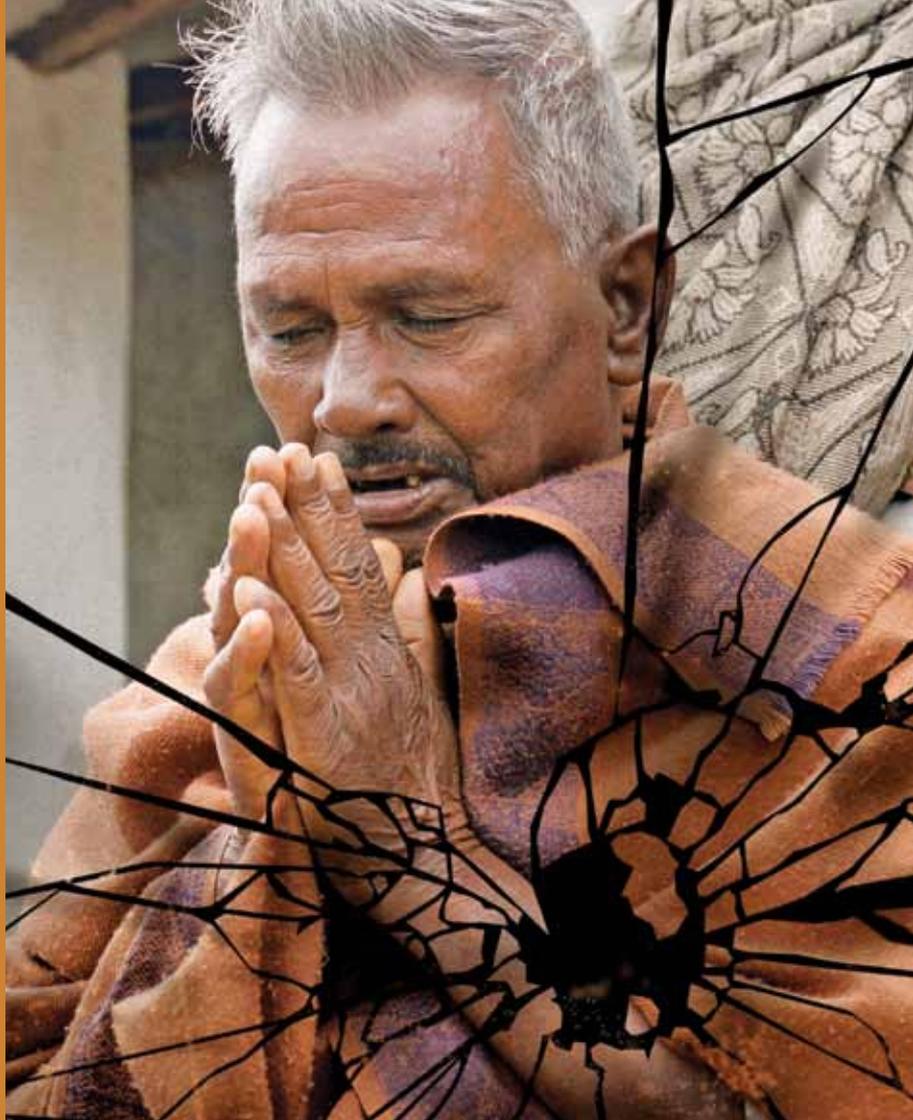
*Eight Days of Devotional Readings
for Suffering Church Action Week 2015*

Patrick Sookhdeo



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hope and aid for the persecuted church





Suffering Church
Action Week

1 NOVEMBER – 8 NOVEMBER 2015

“⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. ⁸ We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. ¹⁰ We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ¹¹ For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. ¹² So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

¹³ It is written: “I believed; therefore I have spoken.” Since we have that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak, ¹⁴ because we

know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself. ¹⁵ All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.

¹⁶ Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. ¹⁸ So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”

(2 Corinthians 4:7-18 NIV)

INTRODUCTION

NO CROSS, NO CROWN

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Paul speaks in this passage of the afflictions that he had to undergo, and which the Christian community continues to experience. He depicts in graphic terms the fragility of our human bodies and minds, using language from the first century sports arena to describe a wrestling match in which an opponent pursues, corners and then knocks him down. His body is battered with many a blow, to the point where he feels totally crushed, unable to live. Yet out of this comes an experience that brings both renewal of strength and a purpose for going on, as Paul sees the glorious end and the certainty of victory.

Paul was martyred. But death is not the end for Christian believers, and martyrdom is not defeat. As Paul had written earlier, “Death has been swallowed up in victory.” (I Corinthians 15:54) And for martyrs, dying is the most glorious victory of all, as those who have been faithful unto death receive from their Lord Himself the crown of life (Revelation 2: 10).

Monica was one of more than 200 Nigerian girls in their early-mid teens who were kidnapped from their school in Chibok by Boko Haram militants in April 2014 and forcibly converted to Islam. But Monica refused to deny her Lord. The militants therefore buried her up to her neck and stoned her to death. “To die for the sake of Christ – that’s the happiest thing for me,” said her father, Pastor Mark, as he talked this year of Monica’s martyrdom. Her mother Marta said, “Monica is now in heaven because she refused to convert.”

Monica now wears her martyr’s crown.

Lord, teach me to follow You to the end, whether as a living martyr or dying for You.

SUNDAY
1 NOVEMBER 2015

TREASURE IN EARTHEN VESSELS

 (2 CORINTHIANS 4:7)

Despite our modern technological triumphs, the human body remains frail and vulnerable. We have put men on the moon. We have decoded every letter of our DNA. But we still live in bodies that can be destroyed by a single bite from a tiny insect, bodies that grow old and wear out. Yet within these humble clay jars, so easily smashed to pieces, lies a treasure that is priceless and indestructible – the light of the knowledge of the glory of God (v.6). The Holy Spirit within us testifies to a life beyond human existence, the divine living in a human body, so that the body becomes the Temple of God, indeed becomes the naos, the innermost shrine, where God Himself has taken up residence.

This weakness and vulnerability are meant to demonstrate the awesome power of God. For in our weakness we are strong. In our frailty, the power of God is made manifest. The experience of aging, of watching our physical strength and mental faculties slowly fade, can bring with it a sense of discouragement and futility. Yet in this fragile state the power of God is not dimmed; rather it can shine still brighter. Some of the most beautiful people are those who are near the end of their lives, when only the radiance of God is seen in them.

Generations of Christians have rejoiced to affirm this truth by singing, “I am weak but Thou art strong”. They know that the power they draw on transcends any human weakness or even human strength, because the source of that power is God Himself.

Lord, in my weakness and vulnerability enable me to know Your transcendent power.

SORE PRESSED BUT NOT HEMMED IN

 (2 CORINTHIANS 4:8)

In 2 Corinthians 1:8 Paul wrote of the pressure he had been under, so great that he despaired even of life. These afflictions were physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual, coming from every direction. I am reminded of faithful Syrian church leaders, like Professor Jany Haddad, who continue to minister in the city of Aleppo through the current war, enduring daily bombardment, snipers, chronic shortages of food, water and electricity. As other leaders leave, so the pastoral responsibilities grow for those who remain.

Paul was “afflicted in every way” just like his Master (Isaiah 53). Yet Paul also describes the crushing weight as a “slight momentary affliction” in comparison with the “eternal weight of glory beyond all measure” which was to come (2 Corinthians 4:17). So the crushing weight did not overwhelm him, for God provided a way out.

Paul’s faith enabled him to carry on - not to a place of earthly rest but to continue in the battle and task that His Master had set before him. As Christ had shown already, it is not until the end of life that “the strife is o’er, the battle done”. Later, when he knew death was near, Paul wrote, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7).

There are many who have fought the good fight and kept the faith to the very end. Pastor Eduard Petrosian travelled from the safety of Armenia to Aleppo to minister to Armenian Christians there in June 2015, stepped on a landmine and was killed. He had fought the good faith and finished the race.

Lord, in spite of all the difficulties, give me Your strength to serve You to the end.

MONDAY
2 NOVEMBER 2015

PERPLEXED BUT NOT IN DESPAIR

 (2 CORINTHIANS 4:8)

There is a mental anguish that comes when we are under pressure from all directions. We do not know what to do. At our wits' end, we freeze, we are paralysed. This state of confusion and discouragement, brought about by manifold afflictions and troubles, is described by a Greek word often translated "perplexed". From the same root comes a stronger word translated "despair" meaning "utter despair, having lost all hope or positive counterbalance".

It is the mental state of someone deeply troubled, who has lost all perspective on their situation and can see only negatives, for whom everything seems futile and meaningless. Imagine the thoughts of Iraqi Christian leaders, forced with their congregations from their homes and their churches by the advancing Islamic State militants. As they grieve for the destruction of 2,000 years of Christian witness in Iraq, for the lost lives, for the girls kidnapped and sold as slaves, for the ordinary Christian families uprooted and dispossessed, for the church buildings turned into mosques or jihadist headquarters, they must be at their wits' end to know what they should do.

But Paul affirms that we must not give up hope. We must have faith in God, that treasure dwelling in the earthen vessels of our bodies and minds. He is the God who gives wisdom to those who lack it (James 1:5), whose Holy Spirit is our Counsellor and Comforter (John 14:16), who keeps in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast because they trust in Him (Isaiah 26:3), who has given us the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16).

Lord, when I don't understand, help me to keep trusting in You.

PERSECUTED BUT NEVER ABANDONED BY GOD

 (2 CORINTHIANS 4:9)

Jesus said, “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you” (John 15:20). Paul writes of this persecution, using a word which means to be hunted down. Jesus was hunted by those who sought to take His life and to destroy His character with false accusations. The Christians of Iran and Central Asia never know when the security forces will come knocking to search their homes or arrest them. The Christians of northern Cameroon know that every night Boko Haram militants will attack another Christian village. Imagine their thoughts: “Will it be us tonight?” David wrote in Psalm 64:2-4 (NRSV):

*Hide me from the secret plots of the wicked, from the scheming of evildoers,
who whet their tongues like swords, who aim bitter words like arrows,
shooting from ambush at the blameless*

God will not abandon us. Our Lord Jesus had to be abandoned for a period by His Father so that He could save us from our sins. He cried out in His anguish: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). Some may know the pain of being abandoned by one we have loved and depended on. How much this was magnified for Jesus when His Heavenly Father abandoned Him. Many Christians have experienced a “dark night of the soul” when God seems far away. But soon the Lord will turn His face towards you again and give you peace (Numbers 6:25-26 NIV).

Ultimately it is not our enemies but His goodness and mercy that shall follow us all the days of our life (Psalm 23:6).

Lord, thank you that the you are the Good Shepherd, who never leaves me.

WEDNESDAY
4 NOVEMBER 2015

KNOCKED DOWN BUT NOT KNOCKED OUT

 (2 CORINTHIANS 4:9)

Paul probably has in mind here a wrestling match, and being “struck down” is being thrown to the floor. It was a setback but it was not losing the match. Paul surveys life’s problems and difficulties, and sees himself suffering repeated setbacks, knocked down again and again, his body pummelled with many a blow, his soul battered by many a trial, his emotions in disarray. He may land in the corner as a crumpled heap but up he gets again, despite the bruises, to continue the fight. Down but not out. What kept him? What brought him up again? Nothing but the divine power of God, carried in our weak bodies, like clay jars (v. 7).

Perseverance and fortitude are rare qualities. It is far more normal to give up when setbacks come. The temptation is always there to find the easy way out, to take an easy road. It is the exceptional person who will stand and having done all to stand (Ephesian 6:13).

When Islamic State fighters launched a major attack on the Syrian town of Kobani in June 2015 many people were killed or injured, but amongst the deaths was 19-year-old Shigho, who was executed for having left Islam to follow Christ. Other converts hiding in the city said to those who sought to encourage and comfort them after this incident, “Don’t worry about us. Even if they were to cut our heads off ten times we would still say ‘Jesus is Lord!’”

Lord, help me to keep on keeping on.

CARRYING AROUND IN OUR BODY

THE DYING OF JESUS (2 CORINTHIANS 4:10-12)

FRIDAY
6 NOVEMBER 2015

Paul sums up verses 8 and 9 by saying that we carry around in our bodies the dying of the Lord Jesus, so that His life may also be shown in our body. He chose to write the word nekrosis, meaning putting to death, not the word thanatos meaning death. He is not speaking of a one-off event such as identifying with Christ's death through baptism. Rather, he means daily exposure to danger and death for Christ's sake, sharing in His sufferings. No doubt, Paul was remembering the Lord's own words about taking up our crosses daily (Luke 9:23).

Sometimes people long for death, to bring an end to the sufferings of this world. To face ongoing situations of difficulties and dangers can take its toll not just on the body, mind and emotions but ultimately upon the spirit. However, if we recognise that we do it for Christ, that in the act of daily dying we are identifying with Him, it can give to us the peace and serenity of knowing that we are in the divine will. Just as Jesus had to do the will of God, through the agony of Gethsemane to the horror of Calvary, so we too experience not only the tragedy of His life but also His ultimate triumph.

And all this is to make the life of Jesus visible in our bodies. So the purpose of suffering with Christ is to point to God, to strengthen and to renew our beings, to be a source of encouragement to others, thus fulfilling God's will for us.

Lord, in my brokenness, reveal Your beauty that others may see and follow You.

THE PURPOSE OF SUFFERING

 (2 CORINTHIANS 4:13-15)

Paul gives believers three reasons why their loving heavenly Father may ask them to suffer on this earth for a while.

He begins with an affirmation from Psalm 116:10: “I have kept my faith, even when I said, ‘I am greatly afflicted.’” Suffering can drive some people away from the Christian faith. But Paul has kept his faith (v.13). His certainty is rooted in the resurrection of Jesus, which assures him that he too will be raised up by God (v.14). This gives him the strength and courage to go on in faith.

Our sufferings have an underlying meaning and purpose. Paul discerned the threads of blessing that connected his sufferings to his brothers and sisters and to his Lord. “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). God weaves the tapestry of our lives. On one side the threads are tangled and knotted. But, turned over, it has a design and pattern that give glory to their Maker.

The first reason for our suffering is for our own sake (v.15a), that we might be purified to become more Christ-like. Job affirmed, “When he has tested me, I shall come forth as gold” (Job 23:10; see also James 1:2-4).

The second reason is for others, who give thanks to God as they see the life of Jesus revealed in us, and to draw non-believers to Him (v.15b). As Tertullian wrote, “The blood of Christians is seed.”

The final reason is to bring glory to God (v.15c).

Lord, help me to trust in Your promise that all things work together for good.

THE GLORY THAT IS TO COME

 (2 CORINTHIANS 4:16-18)

Paul turns his eyes from earthly sufferings to heavenly glory, from the cross we must carry for a while to the crown we shall wear for ever. Earth's afflictions shall be forgotten in glory. He speaks too of the process of inward renewal that prepares us for this weight of glory. That is why we do not grow weary or lose heart.

The Christian lives with the End in view. Before Paul lies the glory that can never be taken away from him. Death will be but the gateway to a more perfect existence, where there will be no more sin, suffering, or pain, no more pressures or afflictions. There will be only the eternal bliss of being in the presence of the One for whom all of life's journey with its attendant difficulties has been lived. There we shall enter into the eternal and everlasting arms of our Beloved. There we shall drink of the streams of eternal life and sing those songs of eternal joy, as we dwell in the divine presence. There will be no night or darkness, for the glory of God is its light and its lamp is the Lamb (Revelation 21).

This vision is no wistful daydream or fairy tale, but a reality. For Paul and for God's suffering people, who constitute the Body of Christ that was broken and is again being broken through violence and persecution, all our afflictions will give way to the reality of a true shalom and heavenly wholeness.

So we do not lose heart.

Lord, in all my sufferings enable me to glorify You and never to lose heart.

SUNDAY
8 NOVEMBER 2015

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