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How Jesus handled Suffering

Jesus carried the Cross and died. But we first die and then bear the Cross all our lifetime (Col 3:3; Mt 10:38). That's why Paul in his supreme pursuit of life talks first about the "power of Christ's resurrection" and then the "fellowship of His sufferings" (Phil 3:10). It is not suffering and then resurrection, but resurrection and then suffering. Before taking us through the furnace of suffering, God clothes us with His power. He equips us with power to handle suffering.

What does "fellowship with Christ's suffering" mean? Is it a gift or an enablement or an experience? Fellowship is a relationship or acquaintance which results from knowledge. The intimacy between the first man and the first woman is described as : "Adam KNEW Eve his wife" (Gen 4:1a). Fellowship with Christ's suffering primarily means the understanding of His suffering and how He handled it so we may apply those lessons in our own lives. This is what apostle John meant when he called himself a "companion in the suffering of Jesus Christ" (Rev 1:9).

The study of the suffering of Christ is too sacred to be casual about. It's a holy ground. We should remove our sandals while watching it. It was a burning bush. It was a real fire, but the flames could not consume Christ. He was "kept by the POWER of God" while "tested by fire!" (1 Pet 1:5,7). All His life He walked through fire, but the furnace was seven times hotter than usual during the last week of His earthly life. Let's pick up from this week five of His sufferings specifically and learn how He handled them.

1. Fear of Death

Three of the four evangelists have recorded the words of Jesus born out of the fear of death. "He took Peter, James and John with Him, and He began to be troubled and deeply distressed. Then He said to them: My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch" (Mk 14:33,34).

From day one Jesus knew that He had come to die. He knew from the beginning that He would be crucified. But when the hour approached, He got "deeply distressed." The fear of death is more horrifying than death itself. It's easy to talk about death when death is not at our doorstep. God knows that the fear of death torments humankind all their lifetime. The incarnation of Jesus was to potentially release us from the bondage of the fear of death (Heb 2:14,15).

Jesus handled the fear of death with two powerful weapons —

a) Prayer of Commitment

When fear of death gripped the Lord, He offered a prayer of commitment that is unparalleled in history. He said, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will" (Mt 26:39). The fact that He repeated the same prayer thrice speaks of His dead earnestness. The Father God was so pleased with the prayer of His Son that He sent a special angel from Heaven and strengthened Him (Lk 22: 42-45). His feeble hands, fainting knees and faltering feet received strength to stand up and face whatever (Heb 12:12). He told His disciples, "Rise, let us be going!" (Mt 26:46).

The visitation of angels may not always be for the opening of prison doors. The appearance of the angel in the Garden of Gethsamane was not to deliver the Son of God from the soldiers but to enable Him to endure the hour of horror (Jn 12:27). Even after the angel strengthened Jesus, the agony was still

there! The angel was ministering to Him but He was sweating blood! (Lk 22:43,44). This is God's power manifesting in our suffering. More often than we think, the answer to prayer is power for endurance rather than power for deliverance.

Another truth to be learnt here is that the responsibility to pray is primarily on the sufferer. "Is anyone among you suffering? Let HIM pray" (Js 5:13a). Don't depend on Pastor Peter or Evangelist James or Prophet John to do the praying for you. One will go to sleep, the other will slumber and the next will be snoring! They have enough of their own sorrows to sink them! (Lk 22:45). In fact Jesus never asked His disciples in the Garden to pray for "Him," but only for "them" so they might not yield to temptation. He simply longed for their company and moral support when He said, "Stay here and watch with Me" (Mt 26:38; Mk 14:34). Others can support us in prayer but not substitute our praying. No one can understand the pain like the suffering candidate.

b) Hope of Resurrection

Death shows no partiality whether you are sweet sixteen or sane sixty. But Good Friday is not the end. There is an Easter Sunday! It was the hope of resurrection that toughened the faith of Christ during suffering and crucifixion. He endured the Cross in anticipation of the joyous resurrection. He despised the shame in the hope of glorification (Heb 12:2). He was disappointed by the hostility from sinners but He was not discouraged (v 3). The throne of tomorrow inspired Him to endure the thorn of today! Whenever Jesus spoke of His death, He invariably talked about His resurrection also. See for example Mark 9:30,31 and 10:32-34.

I believe that whenever Jesus was tormented by the fear of death, He would have reminded Himself of Psalm 16:9-11, "You will not leave My soul in Hades, nor will You allow Your Holy

One to see corruption... You will make Me full of joy in Your presence."

The faith heroes of yesteryears refused immediate deliverance because their eyes were on the ultimate resurrection (Heb 11:35). Apostle Paul graphically explained his non-stop suffering as "hourly danger" and "daily death" (1 Cor 15:30,31). He actually boasted of such a life because of his hope of resurrection. He challenged, "O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?" (v 55). He ended up with praise, "Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (v 57). For no other experience of our lives can we witness God's power so much as for suffering.

2. Wounds from Friends

We have one of the most striking prophetic statements about the sufferings of Christ in Zechariah 13:6, "Someone will say to him: What are these wounds in your hands? Then he will answer: Those with which I was wounded in the house of my friends."

There's nothing more hurting than being hurt by friends. Who betrayed Jesus? His Finance Secretary. Who disowned and cursed Him? His Chief Secretary. Who deserted Him? His Deputy Secretaries.

King David's life experiences in history had a prophetic reflection in the life of the Son of David. King David mourned, "It is not an enemy who reproaches me; then I could bear it. Nor is it one who hates me who has magnified himself against me; then I could hide from him. But it was you, a man my equal, my companion and my acquaintance. We took sweet counsel together, and walked to the house of God in the throng ... Even my own familiar friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has acted as a traitor" (Psa 55:12-14; 41:9). Those who

rose against David were his close friends, family folks and fellowship members. The lot of Jesus was the same. Can we expect anything better?

Jesus handled the hurts from friends by confidence in God and love towards them.

a) Confidence of Security

It is the feeling of insecurity that throws us off gear when we are disappointed by those whom we trust most. Whatever people spoke or did against Jesus never shook Him because His security was anchored in His Father.

The devil literally entered the heart of Judas and enticed him to betray his Lord. It was no ordinary thing. For Jesus it was more than a sword piercing through His heart. But He was not agitated. He stayed calm because He KNEW that “the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God” (Jn 13:2,3). No doubt Judas was about to hand Him over to the executors. But the pain of this betrayal was overcome by the knowledge and confidence that all things had already been given into His hands by His Daddy in Heaven. Everyone thought that the soldiers were taking Jesus to Golgotha. But Jesus knew that He was actually going to God! What a difference confidence in God makes on the face of betrayal and denial!

Friends or family folks or foes cannot snatch from us what the Heavenly Father has given us. Anyone can steal your purse but not your power! Anyone can stop your promotion in your career but no one can shake your position in Christ! Robbery belongs to earth but we are enriched in the heavenlies! (Eph 1:3; Mt 6:20). People may forsake you but God never! (Heb 13:5b). “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Rom 8:31). “So we may boldly say: The Lord is my Helper... What can man do to me?” (Heb 13:6).

b) Service of Love

When those whom we trust most ditch or desert us, we get terribly upset. We will be tempted to abuse them and avoid them. Jesus must have had the same temptation because the Scriptures tell us that He was tempted like us in all areas. He overcame this temptation by continuing to serve His disciples and shower love on them more than ever. Here’s John’s record: “When Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end ... He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded” (Jn 13:1-5).

Apostle Paul captures the significance of Christ’s act of love for His disciples in spite of their failures when he writes, “The Lord Jesus ON THE SAME NIGHT IN WHICH HE WAS BETRAYED took bread and...” (1 Cor 11:23). Jesus included the betrayer also for the supper! We are not to love people “because of” their goodness, but “in spite of” their badness and weakness. Otherwise there won’t be a single person left in all the world whom we can love!

Washing of feet was indicative of forgiveness, cleansing and fellowship (Jn 13:8-10). Jesus cleansed His disciples in advance for the sins they would commit that night and after! He knew how Peter’s faith would be shaken up. He encouraged him saying, “But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brothers” (Lk 22:31,32). The prayer of Jesus for Peter was more than answered. Look at Peter’s Epistles, especially the first one. In each of its five chapters he encouraged and strengthened believers who had been going through fiery trials and suffering (1 Pet 1:5,6; 2:21; 3:9; 4:12,13; 5:9). This Epistle ministers to each of us today. When suffering is handled in God’s way, the outcome will be glorious and results far reaching.

3. Misunderstanding and Injustice

Jesus was falsely accused. He was not given a fair judgement. Justice was denied to Him. He was grossly misunderstood. When He said, “Destory this temple, and in three days I will raise it up,” the Jews thought He was talking about the building of brick and mortar, whereas He was referring to His body of flesh and blood (Jn 2:19-21). While setting higher standards than the teaching of the Law of Moses, Jesus had to clarify, “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill” (Mt 5:17). Concerning payment of taxes, in no uncertain terms He had taught the people, “Give to Caesar the things which are Caesar’s and to God the things which are God’s” (Lk 20:21-25). But before Governor Pilate the people accused Him, saying, “We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, saying that He Himself is Christ, a King” (23:1,2).

Even the close disciples of Christ misunderstood many of His statements eventhough He talked to them plainly and like a friend. When He warned them about the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees, they started discussing among themselves whether Jesus said so because they had not taken bread with them (Mt 16:6,7). When Jesus rebuked Peter why he should bother about John even if in His will he would be alive till His second coming, talk went around among the disciples that John would not die then! (Jn 21:21-23).

Jesus was perfect in His words. No one could have spoken better. If He Himself was so misunderstood in His day, how do we expect that we can escape the cross of misunderstanding? How often we have to plead with our family members and colleagues that we didn’t mean what they had understood! Can the lot of dry wood be any better than that of the Green Tree?

How Jesus handled misunderstanding and injustice gives us atleast three valuable lessons to experience divine power in suffering—

a) *“God is on the Throne!”*

“You may misunderstand Me, but My Father in Heaven knows My heart. You may mistreat Me, but My Father in Heaven will vindicate Me. You may be sitting on the Prime Minister’s chair or the President’s chair, but the one seated on the throne in Heaven is My Father.” This was the mental response of Jesus to misunderstanding and mistreatment. Look at the answers He gave to Pilate and the Priests —

John 19:10,11, “Pilate said to Him: Do You not know that I have authority to crucify You, and authority to release You? Jesus answered: You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from **above!**”

Luke 22:66-70, “If You are the Christ, tell us. But He said to them: If I tell you, you will by no means believe... Hereafter the Son of Man will sit on the **right hand** of the **power** of God.”

“Power belongs to God” (Psa 62:11). The earlier we learn this truth, the better for us lest we lose our virtues on the face of verbal abuse and assaults.

b) *“Silence is gold!”*

There are times when silence is more powerful than words. Silence is not because we don’t know what to say but it is unspoken confidence and assurance. When the Priest asked Jesus, “Do You answer nothing?”, Jesus kept silent (Mt 26:62,63). When Pilate asked Him, “Do You not hear how many things they testify against You?”, Jesus answered him “not one word,” so that the governor marvelled greatly (Mt 27:13,14).

Why did Jesus stay silent and spoke nothing? Apostle Peter comments on it. 1 Peter 2:23, “When they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly.” If we know that the battle is the Lord’s, we will simply stand still and watch how He delivers us and brings us out as more than conquerors.

c) *“The Scripture must be fulfilled!”*

What God has told us in the light, we must not doubt in the dark. From His childhood Jesus preoccupied Himself with the study of the Scriptures. Through the Holy Spirit He had understood all that had been written about Him in the Holy Writ. He took consistent and conscious effort to live in perfect alignment with the Word of God. As the Word of God incarnate, He lived with the constant realisation of His awesome responsibility to have the Word of God fulfilled in His life — in thought, in word, and in deed. This is overwhelmingly seen during His suffering. See what He said to Peter when the latter cut off the ear of the High Priest’s servant—

“Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Or do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels? How THEN COULD THE SCRIPTURE BE FULFILLED, that it must happen thus?” (Mt 26:52-56).

Jesus didn’t even offer an excited prayer at the crucial hour. He was perfectly relaxed because He saw before His eyes the fulfilment of the Scriptures. Saturating ourselves with the Scriptures is the most effective way of equipping ourselves to handle suffering.

4. Physical Pain

There’s one prayer I make so often in my life: “Lord, I am ready to die anytime; but I’m scared of physical pain. My tolerance level is too low.” I believe God will answer my prayer!

Crucifixion was no ordinary punishment. The pain was unbearable. Jesus was not simply “wounded” but He was “crushed.” That’s how Prophet Isaiah portrays the suffering of Jesus in prophecy (Isa 53:5,10). Let’s see how Jesus handled physical pain—

a) *Mental Preparation*

Besides a general knowledge that He would suffer and die, Jesus was also mentally prepared for the kind of torture He would go through. The Father God sent Moses and Elijah to talk to His Son how He would suffer. Mark and Luke have recorded this information about the Heavenly visitors. “Jesus took Peter, John and James and went up on the mountain to pray... then behold, two men talked with Him, who were Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of His death which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem” (Lk 9:28-31).

Why of all the Old Testament prophets did God choose to send Moses and Elijah to talk to His Son? Both these men suffered immensely in their times. Moses was rejected by the people and slandered against by his associates. Elijah was threatened by a woman and he pleaded death. I’m sure these two men primarily encouraged Jesus. When folks come to us to share their problems, let’s not take it lightly. It may be God’s way of preparing us for a similar situation. Saints and sinners suffer alike. Who can deny this? Don’t miss God’s message everytime you see suffering or hear of it.

b) *Honest Confession*

Jesus cried out His feelings of pain to His Father: “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”

Beware of the popular teaching of the day that you should not confess your pain. “Positive” confession is a psychological principle. The Biblical prescription is “true” confession. Philippians 4:8 is the all time favourite of the proponents of positive confession. But the very first item in this prescription list is, “Whatever things are TRUE ...” Be real. Be truthful.

Paul never concealed or denied the physical weakness he had — “a thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor 12:7). He openly declared that it was a messenger of Satan to beat him. He cried out to God for help. The answer came though not as he expected. He was not healed but enabled to suffer.

Ask whatever help you need for your body that suffers. Jesus asked for water. Seek medical help and submit yourself into the hands of God.

5. Self-sympathy

Jesus had every reason to sympathise for Himself with questions like —

“Do I deserve this? Didn’t I obey My Father in everything? Didn’t I do only good to people? I forgave sinners. I healed the sick. I fed the hungry. I encouraged the downhearted. Why oh why should I suffer like this?”

Jesus overcame self-sympathy by empathising with the problems of others. There are three outstanding examples—

a) The women of Jerusalem

As Jesus was carrying the Cross on the dusty roads of Jerusalem, women mourned and lamented over Him. But Jesus turning to them said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children” (Lk 23:27-31). Jesus realised that He was going to Heaven to enjoy glorious days whereas those women and their children had more difficult

days ahead. The thought of their future suffering made Jesus lift His eyes off His present suffering.

b) The thief on the cross

One of the two criminals rebuked the other saying, “Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong” (Lk 23:39-41). A statement like this could have dumped Jesus in self-sympathy. Here again Jesus turned His eyes towards the desperateness of the thief. True the thief was being punished justly, but Jesus respected his last minute realisation and request. “I’m going to Paradise. Come along with Me!”

c) The women by the Cross

There were three Marys standing near the Cross — Mummy Mary, Aunty Mary and Magdalene Mary (Jn 19:25). Their tear-filled eyes could have driven Jesus to self-sympathy. Instead of giving place to it, Jesus began to think about His mother’s need. He gave Mary as a mother to John, and John as a son to Mary. There was an adoption ceremony near the Cross! “My Father is getting back His Son. But mummy, you are losing a son. Take John for Me!”

The suffering of others is greater than ours. The day when this truth dawns on us is the day when we will learn how to handle suffering. It was when Job prayed for his friends that God restored his losses (Job 42:10).

Strong when weak!

Suffering is suffering, but it is while suffering we can experience God’s power in a measure greater than ever. That’s why apostle Paul boasted of his suffering rather than he bemoaned them. He testified, “The Lord said to me: My grace is sufficient for you, because My strength is made perfect in

weakness. Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my weaknesses, that the POWER of Christ may rest on me... For when I am WEAK, then I am STRONG!" (2 Cor 12:9,10). Reflecting on how Jesus handled suffering, Paul comments, "Though He was crucified in WEAKNESS, yet He lives by the POWER of God" (2 Cor 13:4). And he adds, "We also are WEAK in Him, but we shall live with Him by the POWER of God!" Let's shout, Amen!