

Sharing in the Sufferings of Christ

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[0 : 0 0] Well hello everyone it's the start of Lent and the start of a new teaching series A Passion for Christ and what better way to inspire some passion than to talk about suffering okay this is going to be interesting to be honest if I'm going to share the gospel with someone if I'm going to talk about why I follow Jesus I'm not sure that suffering would be where I'd start you know it's not a very attractive topic but we can't ignore how often Christians suffering and sacrifice appear in the Bible we follow Jesus the suffering servant who told us to take up our cross and follow him Jesus who suffered and died for us and Paul well he talks about suffering a lot in fact he uses the word suffering more than any other writer in the New

Testament and this letter of his to Corinthians seems to hold suffering right at its heart which is why as Paul starts the letter with his standard thanksgiving to God he refers to him as the father of compassion and the God of all comfort right from the start what does Paul want the readers to know about God he wants them to know that God is with us when we suffer that he comforts us in our troubles and it's because of that that 2 Corinthians has so much to say about following Jesus and suffering and well the first thing we see is that suffering shows us that the gospel matters if the good news of Jesus is just some idea we have a nice way of thinking about life then there's no point in suffering for it it's just bland philosophy it doesn't matter but Paul knew that the gospel he had been called to preach was vital it was life-changing world-changing even and because of that he knew that everything he went through whether good or bad had a purpose look at verse 6 if we are distressed it is for your comfort and salvation that's Paul's perspective the well-being of the church and the opportunity for more people to follow Jesus was well worth the suffering that he and his fellow Christians faced and if you look through the book of Acts you see that the church suffered a great deal right from the beginning but they thought that suffering was worth it for the gospel but that's not all verse 6 continues if we are comforted it is for your comfort which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer so when suffering comes to an end that has a purpose too in this case providing encouragement for other Christians who are still suffering it says well God rescued them surely he'll rescue us too so the point here is not that we need to seek out suffering we don't need to deliberately make our lives hard in order to serve God rather we accept that following Jesus isn't always easy and that if we truly give our whole selves for God's purposes then our own desires for an easy life have to come become second or third or fifth or gonna last now a few years ago I met someone who seemed to really embody this idea he had just become a vicar and had decided to wear his collar all of the time just whenever he went out no matter what he was doing he looked like a vicar and this was an opportunity to see real blessing because he would run into strangers on the street and they'd see him as somebody safe to talk to and so he had the opportunity to share God's love with so many people that might not otherwise experience it but the flip side of that was that he also took a lot of flack for it and not everybody that he met would respond positively to seeing him and he described all sorts of things happening to him he would get yelled at in the street he had somebody follow him home he even had someone throw a brick through his house his house window once and as he described these things he then paused and he sort of went hmm Jesus was crucified and that took the wind out of me I remember sitting there thinking oh my goodness what a challenge but this guy's the real deal you know here's someone who is living with the reality that the son of God died for him and it completely changed his priorities and because of that he put himself in a position yes to experience suffering but also to see God do amazing things which brings us to my second point which is that suffering shows us that God is good it seems a strange thing to say doesn't it surely we say that God is good when good things happen we praise him for the good gifts he gives us and that is right and good but here's the thing one of the most dangerous temptations that Christians

can face is to say that God wants nothing more than for us to be healthy wealthy and happy and that if we have everything we want then surely God must be smiling on us or maybe we want to say that yes we go through hard times you know who doesn't but they can't really be that hard because God's looking after us he won't make us go through anything more than we can handle well what's Paul's take on this verse 8 we do not want you to be uninformed brothers and sisters about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia we were under great pressure far beyond our ability to endure so that we despaired of life itself well this following Jesus business is getting more and more attractive by the second isn't it i hope some of you are still around and you haven't switched off your computers and run away we need to hear stuff like this particularly i think in the uk where being a christian is relatively safe you know the church is more part of the establishment in this country you know i've never suffered to the point that i've despaired of life itself the most trouble i've faced for following jesus actually is the occasional bit of ridicule or disagreement but right now we have brothers and sisters around the world who are be facing persecution and imprisonment and even death for their faith and we must not be uninformed of the price some christians pay but verse 9 this happens that we might not rely on ourselves but on god who raises the debt he has delivered us from such a deadly peril and he will deliver us again so there's that perspective thing that's what we're doing again again the church suffers and in their suffering they get to see god at work they face more than they could possibly hope to endure and yet here they are still standing so what else could that mean but that god has rescued them and paul while he has this eternal perspective who is the god that he serves well he's the god who raises the dead who offers eternal life and that god is trustworthy he delivered us once he can do it again now as a church that isn't being persecuted in a country where we can worship and pray openly without fear i think we have a duty to pray for that deliverance to to call out to god to show his goodness for christians who are suffering and through that prayer we will see that we are united with them because and this is my final point suffering shows us that the church is united now how awesome is prayer i think i need constant reminding actually to appreciate prayer more to appreciate that privilege that it is to spend time in the presence of god in the presence of god and to be involved in his saving work you know it's no small thing that paul describes at the end of our reading on him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us as you help us by your prayers then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many we can't ignore the significance of that as you help us by your prayers now paul's trust is very much in god but he recognizes the impact that the corinthian church's prayers have had on him these people are hundreds of miles away from where paul is and yet paul says to them you are united with us in our struggles through your prayers you know it's no coincidence that our worship includes prayer for the world it's a product of god's grace and a sign of his desire for us to work with him that he chooses to act through us and in answer to the prayers of his people when we pray for our fellow christians in times of need our voices are raised with theirs to the throne of god and it doesn't matter how far apart we are from them i remember several instances in my teens when a crisis would unite my church normally it would be a serious illness or injury of someone in the community and the call would go out to drop everything and start praying often the church building would be opened up as well and people would come together to pray and we truly became family in those moments the church is at its best when the petty squabbles that are often so visible from the outside give way to the suffering and the need of our sisters and brothers we're reminded in those moments that we are truly one in christ and just as the need of one becomes the need of all of us as we pray so as god answers those prayers the blessing of one becomes a blessing to us all we share in the story we praise god for his goodness we give thanks for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many god wastes nothing whatever your circumstances at the moment i hope that you take that away that god is at work in your comfort and in your suffering we are called simply to offer ourselves trusting that in good times and in bad god is working all things for good so as a church let's share in each other's sufferings let's bear one another's burdens and in doing so let's see the goodness of god as he answers the prayers of his people amen you you