

Rejoicing in suffering (Rev David Witchell)

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[0 : 00] We continue our sermon series on suffering and today rejoicing in suffering.

! But first of all, a prayer.! O God, our Heavenly Father, our strength and peace and joy, as we consider your holy word.

! Give us your grace according to our need. Help us to know and love and trust you more. To pray better and always to do your will.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Amen. One of the happiest and most contented people I knew was an African called Desiree.

He lived in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and was a pastor in the Anglican Church there, later to become a bishop.

[1 : 16] One day I received a telephone call from a missionary society asking if our church could help fund his visit to the UK so that he could attend a renewal conference in Plymouth.

In return he would preach for us on the Sunday with hospitality being provided by the parish. Well, we were so glad to have him for those few days when he was lodged with us.

An amazing man, full of the joy of the Lord, with sparkle and enthusiasm. It was hard to believe that he and his people had been subject to brutal treatment by the militia, the rebels in the Congo.

There were times when he and his family, under attack, had to flee into the bush. And on one occasion he lost his baby.

They had to go there to avoid being killed. He had little or no money because the church was too poor to give him a stipend and so his wife used to make clothes to bring some money in.

[2 : 42] His church meeting place was a clearing. And then later he moved into a school classroom. Eventually having a proper building which was given with help from some of us in the UK.

And eventually he had a school for orphaned children. And a refuge place for women who had been violated by the militia.

I remember driving him round Torquay on his first night with us. And he couldn't believe his eyes at the food that was on the shelves of the shops.

Or the produce in the shop windows. And actually he threw back his head and laughed. And when it was time to have a meal with us for supper, he commented that the food that we had on the table was enough to last for several days for his family.

And yet I don't think I've ever met such a joyful and positive soul bubbling over with joy.

[4 : 01] Yes, joy in the Lord. And later on he was able to do wonderful work in that part of the Congo, in Goma.

Rejoicing in suffering. How can Christians rejoice in suffering? Do we just put a brave face on it and sing I'm H-A-P-P-Y?

Or are we like the small boy who whistled in the dark to keep his spirits up? Instead, we have to be realistic, don't we?

But we know we have a great God who is with us. God offers us his presence in all of life's troubles. And we all have them.

Rejoicing in suffering. Rejoicing for suffering? No, never. Now Desiree, the African, must have hated his suffering and afflictions.

[5 : 16] And so would we. In fact, I can't imagine how I would cope in those situations. But he and his family braved it out for the sake of the gospel.

He was a highly educated man who could speak several languages, but willing to give his all for the sake of Christ and his church.

He actually taught us so much. We were able to give him material things from the UK, for which he was truly grateful.

But he gave us something more, a spiritual uplift. Sadly, he died of COVID. And because of the present violence, his wife and family have had to relocate somewhere else.

But their legacy goes on. Rejoicing in suffering. Not rejoicing for suffering. That is masochism.

[6 : 19] No one would want that in their right mind. There is a great difference. Some Christians misguidedly went into flagellation and wearing hair shirts.

And there are some strange cults in certain religions which go into a form of self-harm as a form of discipline.

Well, this passage in Romans chapter 8 is none of that. And gives us reasons for praising God even whilst we are suffering.

We can turn something that is negative into a positive. Praising God while we are suffering.

Rejoicing in suffering. Can you believe this? Will we believe this? If we will, Paul says that God will change our lives.

[7 : 27] We shall be able to live confidently no matter what tests come our way. No matter what happens, nothing can change God's love for us.

And that's worth thinking about when danger and trouble or accident or death strikes. Sometimes Christians feel that they should be delivered from accidents and sickness and death.

And when troubles come, we might ask, why did this happen to me? Why did God let this happen to me? But the Bible does not promise escape from suffering.

Christianity is not a lucky charm. If the Bible did promise us escape from suffering, then everyone would become a Christian, wouldn't they?

Just to avoid accidents and troubles and heart attacks and cancer. That might be a good motive for becoming superstitious or even religious in some sort of way.

[8 : 41] But it's a poor motive for being a Christian. God instead offers his presence in all of life's troubles.

Paul tells us that nothing can shake God's love for us. When and if God lifts us out of a crisis, that's wonderful and we can praise his name for it.

But there are other times when we have to go through what life offers and death ultimately brings.

Trusting in the Lord. For the Christian, every cloud may not have a silver lining.

But remember, behind the cloud, the sun is always shining. Shining today, but if it was overcast, it would still be shining, wouldn't it?

Next month, we shall be commemorating the 80th anniversary of VE Day. The 80th anniversary of the ending of the Second World War.

[9 : 57] And there, in a cellar in Cologne, where a number of Jews had hidden themselves for the duration of the war, the Allies found these words scratched onto the wall.

I believe in the sun even when it's not shining. I believe in love even when it is not. I believe in God even when he is silent.

When things are bleak, remember, behind the cloud, the sun is always shining. God is there. He cares.

He will see us through. But it's not always easy to believe, is it? Because we're human beings. In fact, life can be far from easy.

Jesus never promised that it would be easy. And when he says, follow me, he makes it quite clear that to be a disciple involves cost.

[11 : 08] Christianity involves making a stand. Perhaps the need to be different. To refuse to conform. To stand up for what is right.

To sacrifice comfort in order to help others. the German pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, did just that in making a stand to oppose Hitler in Nazi Germany during the last war.

And this last week has marked the martyrdom of Bonhoeffer who refused to compromise as the majority of the churches in Germany had with the Nazi regime.

He and a few others formed into the confessing church and he was brave enough to stand up to Hitler and he stood firm. But he was savagely treated and imprisoned at Flossenbug.

And tragically he was hanged in April 1945. 80 years ago just. But it was a spiteful act as his captors sensed that the war was ending and didn't want him to go free.

[12 : 41] Bonhoeffer's letters and papers from prison are powerful and readable. written with faith in the midst of suffering.

On suffering he wrote those hands once so strong and active he was a pianist have now been bound.

Helpless and forlorn you see the end of your deed. Yet with a sigh of relief you resign your cause to a stronger hand and are content to do so.

For one brief moment you enjoyed the bliss of freedom only to give it back to God that he might perfect it in glory. Rejoicing while suffering However bad things get we can continue to praise God for his goodness his promises and his ultimate purposes.

our gospel passage from Matthew chapter 5 the beatitudes the beautiful sayings from the Sermon on the Mount are at the heart of all this.

[14 : 01] They turn all the world's accepted standards on their head commending meekness in favour of bullying forgiveness in favour of retribution peace instead of war.

We should all do that shouldn't we? And so we pray our world leaders will do that too. But follow that path and they will crucify you.

that's what our Lord rode into on Palm Sunday riding with humility on the back of a donkey proclaiming God's kingdom in the midst of the hostile Roman authorities and religious leaders of Jerusalem leading to Good Friday and the cross at Calvary.

the upside down kingdom of God in the world's eyes but rejoicing in suffering. We've just been given a Palm Cross haven't we?

To hold in our hands a symbol of suffering and defeat yet turned into triumph and glory through Christ's sacrifice for us and rising again.

[15 : 30] And this is what we read about in 1 Peter chapter 4 for all of us who are trying to walk the path of Jesus.

Sometimes not very successfully but our will is there to want to serve him. Not to be surprised at what is happening around us but to rejoice that we are participating in the sufferings of Christ so that we may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed Peter writes.

In every age since the time of Jesus many Christians have become the targets of slander and hatred from those who have rejected the gospel.

We see that at its worst when we read the letters from the Barnabas Trust who help people who are persecuted overseas and we often see it on a smaller scale when we ourselves may suffer for walking in the path of Jesus.

As we walk in heavenly love abiding no change my heart shall fear a safe is such confiding for nothing changes here the storm may roar without me my heart may low be laid but God is round about me and can I be dismayed wherever he may guide me his want shall turn me back my shepherd is beside me and nothing can I lack his wisdom ever waketh his sight is never dim he knows the way he taketh and I will walk with him whatever trials whatever we go through God is with us believe in Christ this is the message of the day trust him walk with him respond to his love with your love for he has promised us the kingdom his to him to him to!