

Article of the Month – April 2010

Theology of Suffering (3) – Imprisonment

By Steef van 't Slot, Ph.D.



Although I initiated the series about theology of suffering quite a while ago, it will be helpful to some of you to continue it with some thoughts about imprisonment, as an aspect that Jesus mentioned: ‘... they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues *and prisons* ...’.¹ The context in which Jesus speaks about imprisonment is the ‘signs of the End of the Age’. And of course, at the End of the Age Christian persecution will increase to worldwide dimensions. Yet, there are already many countries where persecution, including imprisonment for Christ’s sake, is common and has been so for a long time.

But, without in any way downplaying the seriousness of this, I would like to draw our attention today to spiritual principles that apply as much to Christ’s disciples in the so-called free world, as they do to our brothers and sisters who have been imprisoned physically. Then we are speaking about *non-physical ways of imprisonment*, namely uncomfortable situations from which one cannot escape, but that nevertheless seem to fit in with God’s plan for such a disciple’s life.² Peter would call that ‘suffering according to God’s will’.³

We love our life so much that we seek all the time to improve it, enrich it, enlarge it, and make it grow in influence, name, reputation and even in ministry. At the same time we tend to forget that Jesus told us that we will lose our life when we seek it.⁴ We are naïve enough to believe that when our motives are sufficiently ‘spiritual’ or ‘pursuing eternal values’ Jesus words no longer apply – but by thinking so we deceive ourselves. Often we fail to discern the deep layers of self-centeredness on which our lives and ministries our built. If that happens, the Lord may lead us into situations that we don’t like, that are so thoroughly uncomfortable and disconcerting, that we tend to do all we can to escape them. If however He hits us with His graceful revelation, we discover that we have been led into a situation where we are forced to ‘lose our life’ – because He desperately wants us to find it!

Had *Joseph* not ‘lost his life’ while in prison, he would never have ‘found it’ on the throne of Egypt. Had not *Moses* ‘lost his life’ while tending sheep, he might never have ‘found it’ in the ministry of leading God’s people out of Egypt and through the desert. Had not *David* ‘lost his life’ fleeing from Saul, hiding in caves, being betrayed by spies for several long years, he might never have ‘found it’ as King of Israel. And of course many more examples can be mentioned. Similarly none of us will attain to the kingdom Jesus promised us when we fail to accept the ‘prisons’ that have been tailor-made for our spiritual formation. These uncomfortable situations are the ‘prisons’ I’m talking about.

¹ Luke 21:12 (italics mine)

² It is obvious therefore, that I am not speaking here about addictions or other sinful habits

³ 1 Pet. 4:19

⁴ John 12:25

Jesus speaks about persecution as common for His disciples⁵ and eventually we will all have to ask ourselves the question Jesus expressed when He was arrested ‘Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given Me?’⁶ Very often we complain because we feel that we ‘have been treated unjustly’ or that ‘life is not fair’ or that ‘it was not my fault’ – or any other such words. What Jesus said however, proves that He understood His way and agreed to it. He did not resist His suffering, but laid down His life voluntarily. No one took it from Him by force.⁷

It may be one of the biggest struggles in our spiritual lives to learn to do just that: move away from the complaint about our suffering to the embrace of it. Paul said something to that effect to the Corinthians, who resorted to secular court-cases in order to obtain their rights: ‘Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?’⁸ In fact he states that, by seeking ‘your right’ you have already missed the lessons of self-denial, humility and suffering unjustly, like Christ, that could have given you the spiritual gain the Lord intended for you.

One last thought for now comes from the conversation in which Jesus restored Peter to his appointed ministry: ‘... when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and *lead you where you do not want to go*’. That was an indication about Peter’s later martyrdom.⁹

Is it not so, that very often our God-designed suffering comes to pass by means where we no longer have the freedom to design our lives or business and do as we please? And are we not taken involuntarily to ‘places’ – prisons – where we don’t want to be? You may think that this has to do with old age, as Jesus seems to indicate. Or is He also referring to the *spiritual maturity* that comes with old(er) age?¹⁰ Jesus’ assignment sounds a hundred times simpler than it actually is: ‘Follow Me!’ When we follow Him, also through the ‘prisons’ of life, we will lose our ‘life’ but find it in the Kingdom in which we are destined to rule.¹¹ And it is immeasurably less painful if we do so voluntarily and with joy! Besides, being ‘imprisoned’ with such an attitude means that we are freer than we have ever been.

That principle and others we will look at in next month’s article, when we consider imprisonments Peter and Paul underwent.

⁵ John 15:20; 16:33

⁶ John 18:11

⁷ John 10:17,18

⁸ 1 Cor. 6:(1-)7

⁹ John 21:18,19 (italics mine)

¹⁰ The Greek word, used in John 21:18 (*γηρασης*, gerases) is similar to the Homeric word (*εγηρασα*, egerasa) that can also be translated as ‘ripening’ or ‘maturing’

¹¹ Luke 22:29

