

Article of the Month – May 2010

Theology of Suffering (4) – Peter and Paul Incarcerated

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In last month's article we looked at the spiritual imprisonments we can find ourselves in, as a God-designed method for our formation as Christ's disciples. Yet, often we do not discern God's hand in this sort of suffering and we are dismayed, try to escape or pray against it. Our non-physical prisons are situations that are uncomfortable, threatening or frightening, and almost always inescapable. They have to do with our health, wealth, relationships and general happiness. On top of that we wonder *why* we

have to suffer, since we walk in God's ways and serve Him with all our hearts. Little do we realize that part of the reasons for our ordeal is to heal our thinking from the straightforward, Old Testament 'blessing-when-you-do-well and curse-when-you-don't-theology'.¹ That theology does not take into account the 'suffering for the sake of righteousness' or 'suffering for the sake of Christ'² – the sort of suffering I described earlier as 'apostleship-suffering'.³ This NT type of suffering is the suffering of the Kingdom, that undeserved, yet formative suffering that goes way beyond human logic, but which God allows for our good.⁴ Now, how did Peter deal with his prison?

Eleven years after Jesus had indicated that Peter would eventually die for his faith,⁵ Peter found himself in prison, after his colleague James had been beheaded recently.⁶ He might have wondered whether the event Jesus had announced was around the corner, whether this was almost the end of his life on earth. After all, James had already been killed; was he to be the next victim of Herod's favors to the Jews?

We may wonder how Peter reacted to such an unnerving situation. Was he fearful to die? Worried about his family and the church? Did he send a call to pray for his release? Was he rattling his chains and making himself a nuisance to the guards? None of the above (although the church did pray hard); Peter simply slept. His attitude was one of peace, quiet, faith and surrender to whatever would happen to him. There was no resistance against his precarious situation in him whatsoever, and when he was liberated supernaturally he was surprised rather than relieved. Peter was to live for another 24 years, but ready to give it up within 24 hours!

And what about Paul? About 17 years after Peter we see Paul in prison⁷, this time during his first incarceration in Rome.⁸ Indeed, he lived in his own rented place, he had a great deal of

¹ See e.g. Deut. 28

² See e.g. 1 Pet. 2:20,21; 3:14,17; 4:12-19; 5:10; Fil. 3:10; Col. 1:24

³ See my article of September 2008

⁴ Rom. 8:28

⁵ John 21:18

⁶ Acts 12:1-12, in AD 44

⁷ After he had already faced long imprisonments in Jerusalem and Ceasarea, Acts 21:33 – 28:16

freedom, although guarded by a soldier and no, there was no death-threat. Yet, Paul could have been pacing his room like a caged panther. But did he? Was he frustrated because he could not travel, teach, preach and plant churches? Not at all, although it would have been an understandable reaction in his circumstances.

On the contrary: he used the given circumstances to the best of his abilities: he prayed, interceded for 'his' churches and wrote letters that still bless millions every day, even 2,000 years later.⁹ He never even asked people to pray for his release. He did not ask people to comfort *him*, but did his utmost to comfort *them* instead.¹⁰ He had truly learned to rejoice in the Lord in all situations and to be content, whatever his circumstances were.¹¹

So, what was the secret of these apostles? We see in them both an attitude of deep surrender to God's will to be done in their lives; a profound consciousness of their vocation and the conviction that God led their lives in all details; no concern whatsoever whether they would continue to live on earth or be killed and go to Heaven, and therefore not the slightest fear of death. Both had been subjected to all sorts of suffering on a regular basis and by experience acquainted themselves with the hard side of apostleship, that a bit more or less of it was of no consequence to them anymore. In addition to this, Paul states that his suffering was also meant to comfort others with the comfort God had given him.¹²

Paul's conclusion, at the end of his life, when he was locked up in Rome for the second time, was that 'everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted'.¹³ These were almost his last words. The second letter to Timothy was his last epistle and this time he knew that he would not be released but offer his ultimate sacrifice.¹⁴

How can we learn to behave like Peter and Paul did under trying circumstances? We must understand that there is no throne without a cross and no birth without pain. Therefore we need to learn how to strengthen ourselves in the Lord, as David did.¹⁵ That demands an exercise in self-discipline:

Let me give you 8 ideas: Learn to *look away from your circumstances* and believe and confess that God is greater than the circumstances. Worship helps us to realize this. Then, *remember how God saved us in the past* – which He can do again. Thirdly, *apply God's promises* and fight unbelief: He can save you too. The opposite of *worrying* – which Jesus told us not to do, is to rejoice – what Paul told us to do.¹⁶ When we *express gratitude* for God's blessings, we learn to see our shortages as smaller than before. By *surrender*, we put God in the right place, saying 'not my will but Yours be done'. We may *ask the Holy Spirit for comfort*, because He knows what comfort we need. After a while, we'll notice that the sting of our pain has disappeared. Finally, *notice how God saved people in the Bible*. If He could restore Job,¹⁷ He can restore you too! May He bless you, when you meditate on these things.

⁸ Acts 28:30, his first Roman imprisonment, from about 60-62 AD, after which he was released, Fil 1:25,26a

⁹ During his first Roman imprisonment he wrote 4 letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon

¹⁰ Fil. 1:3-24

¹¹ Fil. 4:10,11

¹² 2 Cor. 1:4

¹³ 2 Tim. 3:12

¹⁴ 2 Tim. 4:6-8

¹⁵ 1 Sam. 30:6

¹⁶ Matt. 6:25-34 & Fil. 4:4

¹⁷ Job 42:10-16

