

# HOPE

## IN SUFFERING

This sermon outline can be used at a Suffering Church service or meeting. It can be read out as it stands or you can add illustrations of your own or take some from the information on pages 10-18. You might also find helpful material in the small group Bible study on page 22 or the eight-day devotional booklet included with this magazine. Alternatively, the outline can be used as a framework for your own ideas and applications.

## Introduction

Hope and suffering are two constant realities in the Christian life. Suffering in this earthly life is a reality of Christian experience, and hope in our eternal heavenly home is a reality of Christian faith.

## What is suffering?

### 1. Pressure

In Romans 12:12, Paul uses the word *thlipsis*, often translated as “tribulation”. It is derived from verbs meaning to crush, compress, squeeze or break. *Thlipsis* is not mild discomfort but great crushing difficulties, as if a heavy weight were placed on the chest pressing our very life from us.

### 2. Persecution

Persecution was normal for the early Christians; its scars were seen as badges of honour. Those who were persecuting (*diokontas*, v.14) were pursuing the Christians and hunting them down, like a hound following a scent. Such persecution is also normal for many Christians around the world today, who know that they say goodbye to earthly

comfort and security when they make their decision to follow Jesus.

Even where persecution does not occur, the disciples of Christ are always misfits in mainstream society and will suffer in that way. If we do not feel at least a little uncomfortable, alien and out of place in the world, are we really following Christ?

### 3. Pain

Suffering can bring pain and weeping (v.15). Not everyone is persecuted, but we all experience the physical, mental and emotional pain which is common to human existence. This year the Covid-19 virus has traversed the whole planet, causing sickness, death, loss of livelihoods, fear and anxiety on a global scale, adding to the suffering of all.

## Responding to suffering

### 1. Love

#### i. Sincerity of love (v.9)

Love is central to the Christian life. Our love must be genuine, not playacting, and with no ulterior motive.

#### ii. Goodness of love (v.9)

We must love what is good, and with that comes a hatred of evil. We must hate evil with an intensity so great that we shudder and turn away in revulsion. As we shrink in horror from evil we must turn to what is good – good morally, spiritually and savingly – and hold firmly to it as if fixed with superglue.

#### iii. Family basis of love (v.10)

In verse 10, Paul uses a word that occurs nowhere else in the New Testament: *philostorgos*. This is the deep, tender, heartfelt affection that close relatives naturally have for one another. The word *philostorgos* also carried the idea that the love was shown in practical acts of generosity towards the one loved.

#### iv. Honouring each other in love (v.10)

Not only must we love one another, but we must honour one another. Paul says we should strive to be the first to honour any another believer who deserves it, almost as if trying to outdo each other in showing respect and esteem.

#### v. Love for enemies (v.14, 17-21)

We must also love those who persecute us and pray for them that they may repent and that God may pardon them. We should live as peaceably as possible with everyone, even our enemies and persecutors (v.18). So we must not retaliate when we are hurt (v.17). Rather, we must respond to evil with good. Our loving actions and our prayers could change our enemies, leading them to repentance.

### 2. Hope (v.12)

Paul commands us to rejoice in hope. “Hope” has a specific meaning in the Bible. It is used *objectively* to mean the situation for which we hope, a situation glimpsed in many beautiful passages of the Scriptures,

when we shall experience the fulfilment of all God's promises of salvation, when we shall be free at last of the unsatisfied needs and wants of this life, when sin will no longer hinder us. "Hope" is also used *subjectively* in the Bible to mean the feeling of confident assurance and sure expectation that these things, which God has promised, truly will be ours one day.

But how can we rejoice in hope during suffering or tribulation?

### **i. Character**

We can rejoice in our sufferings because of the fruit that will be produced in our characters (Romans 5:4).

### **ii. Counted worthy**

The apostles rejoiced that they had been counted worthy to be disgraced for Christ (Acts 5:41), and all through the centuries believers have rejoiced in the honour of suffering for their Lord.

### **iii. Christ**

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul, who was at the time a prisoner, commanded: "Rejoice in the Lord always." Whatever our outward circumstances, when we turn our thoughts to Jesus, how much there is to cause our hearts to thrill with joy.

## **3. Patience**

Paul writes that we must be "patient". This is a positive and active response, not passive endurance. It is a "brave patience", which perseveres in bearing the load, whatever it is; which refuses to weaken, complain or be discouraged; and refuses also to try to slip out from under the load.

## **4. Prayer**

How can we find the strength to bear our afflictions like this? The number one answer is prayer, for prayer is the refuge and resource of every Christian in time of suffering. Therefore we must be faithful, steadfast and constant in prayer, both with others and on our own.

## **5. Service (v.11-13)**

### **i. Be zealous (v.11)**

There is no room for lethargy in the Christian life. The world is a battleground between good and evil, and our short earthly lives are a preparation for eternity. We must be diligent and zealous.

### **ii. Be aglow with the Spirit (v.11)**

"Aglow" and "spiritual fervour" as some translations put

it, are rather muted versions of what Paul actually wrote in verse 11. For he says we should be spiritually boiling!

### **iii. Serve the Lord (v.11)**

Verse 11 finishes with a command that literally reads: "As regards the Lord – slaving." The key thing about "slaving" in the first century was that everything done was directed by the master's will. As Christians we are all slaves of Christ our Master and must do His will in everything.

### **iv. Generosity (v.13)**

"Share with God's people who are in need," commands Paul. The literal translation is: "As regards the needs of the saints – fellowshipping!" For it is a version of the word *koinonia* that Paul wrote to mean a practical financial contribution.

*Koinonia* is often used in the New Testament to indicate other kinds of sharing and participation, and the word "fellowship" is often used in twenty-first century churches to mean a congregation or getting together for a cup of tea after the Sunday service. But let us remember that Paul saw fellowship as including practical help for needy believers.

### **v. Hospitality (v.13)**

From giving money to needy Christians, Paul now moves to giving them hospitality. It was a kind of hospitality the Christians in Rome knew well – the hospitality offered to fellow-believers, whether travelling preachers, messengers, or those fleeing anti-Christian persecution, some of whom were destitute.

As strangers and pilgrims in a hostile world, first century Christians *had* to care for each other. It is still a necessity in our day, as Christians in many parts of the world are fleeing persecution and in desperate need. When militants attacked the Christian village of Hura in Plateau State, Nigeria on 14 April 2020, it was already hosting survivors from other attacks on nearby Christian communities so that each household in Hura numbered between 17 and 26 people. Twenty-eight homes in Hura were burnt, making hundreds of Christians homeless, many for the second time. After burying their dead, the villagers and their visitors fled to a nearby town to seek refuge.

## **6. Empathy (v.15)**

Paul tells us to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. Our tears bring great comfort to the suffering one. Christians should not be people who shrink from the pain of empathy with those who are suffering.

## **Conclusion**

As we have seen, Christians must endure their persecution and suffering with patience. But this does not mean that there will be no justice, that wrongs will remain unrighted and that cruelty will be forever enthroned triumphant.

God Himself will act. We can place all the injuries and injustices that we suffer into the hands of the Judge of all the earth (Genesis 18:25). What a relief to pass over to Him that responsibility, for He alone knows all the circumstances, past and present, and the deepest thoughts and intentions of each heart. He can judge more justly than we ever can.

In verse 19, Paul writes of God's wrath, and quotes the Lord's words: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay." (Deuteronomy 32:35). We must step aside and not presumptuously interfere as He deals out His perfect justice in His perfect time.

Finally, in verse 21, Paul holds out to us a glorious prospect. If we can continue rejoicing, loving, forgiving and hoping, then evil has not conquered us, no matter how great our suffering. And, if we respond by good, we can conquer evil itself.