

Daily Devotional



Readings and prayers for Suffering Church Action and Awareness Week
2020-2021 | **Patrick Sookhdeo**

Introduction

Jeremiah prophesied in a time of national disaster. But he brought to the exiles in Babylon a message of hope:

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” (Jeremiah 29:11)

He also modelled this message of hope by very publicly buying a field, as the Lord had commanded him, while Jerusalem was being besieged by the Babylonian army (Jeremiah 32:6-9). In a time of disaster, in a period of great uncertainty as to the future, Jeremiah was called by God to invest in hope.

In 2020, the whole world has been struggling with the Covid-19 pandemic. It is an *international* disaster. Our lives have been turned upside down by sickness, bereavement or loss of income, causing great hardship, distress and fear.

Some who persecute Christians have taken the opportunity of the pandemic to re-double their attacks. Government surveillance and community hostility both

look set to increase. I write this on a day when we at Barnabas Fund have been overwhelmed with reports of violent incidents targeting Christians in three African countries, which have left over 170 dead – martyred for their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul, writing to the Christians of Rome at a time of persecution, devoted most of his letter to a magnificent theological treatise in which he opened his mind to them over many key truths of our faith. But towards the end of the letter he made a shift and began to share with them from his very heart, as he focused on how Christians should respond to afflictions affecting themselves or their fellow believers (Romans 12:9-21). He urged them to “weep with those who weep” or in some translations “mourn with those who mourn” (verse 15). What a challenge! Do we truly feel the pain of our Christian brothers and sisters, to the extent that we weep with them in their suffering and anguish?

As for our own suffering, Paul’s command is not to weep but to rejoice in hope (verse 12). This will be the focus of our devotions over the next eight days.

Hope

DAY 1

Romans 5:1-5; 12:12

Now I saw in my dream, that Christian went not forth alone, for there was one whose name was Hopeful (being made so by the beholding of Christian and Faithful in their words and behaviour, in their sufferings at the fair)¹

The word "hope" in the Bible has a meaning that it does not have in any other context. The Old Testament was built on hope. This hope was partially fulfilled in the redeeming death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, but still there remains an ultimate fulfilment, to which the New Testament looks forward.

"Hope" is used in the Bible 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 to mean the feeling of confident assurance and sure expectation that these things, which God has promised, truly will be ours one day.

In Romans chapter 5, Paul explains how as Christians we can rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God, for we are justified by faith and have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1-2). He then moves straight from rejoicing in our hope of glory to rejoicing in our sufferings, and unpacks for us how suffering itself produces the wonderful fruit of hope (Romans 5:3-4).

In chapter 12, Paul reminds the persecuted Christians in Rome a second time to rejoice in their Christian hope (Romans 12:12), and again moves straight on to the subject of suffering.

In Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Hopeful is converted by seeing the persecution of Christian and Faithful at Vanity Fair, a persecution which they endured patiently and which ended with the brutal martyrdom of Faithful. Suffering produces hope.

**My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness²**

Patience

DAY 2

Romans 12:12

**Be still my soul the Lord is on thy side
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain
Leave to thy God to order and provide
In every change He faithful will remain³**

Suffering for Christ was normal for the early Christians; its scars were seen as badges of honour, bestowed by the Lord.

In Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Mr Valiant-for-Truth, knowing that he is about to die, spoke of how difficult his pilgrimage had been and yet how he did not regret any of the suffering he had endured on his way to heaven. He left behind his sword, his courage and his skill for other pilgrims who would follow him, but "my marks and scars I carry with me, to be a witness for me that I have fought His battles who now will be my rewarder".

Suffering is normal for many Christians around the world today. Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22) and the white-robed saints in heaven are those who came out of the great tribulation (Revelation 7:13-14).

Even where persecution does not occur, the disciples of Christ are always misfits

in mainstream society and will, at the very least, suffer in that way. Jesus warned us that the world will hate us because we do not belong to it (John 15:18-19). If we do not feel at least a little uncomfortable, alien and out of place in the world, are we really following Christ?

Writing to believers in a context where suffering is the norm – which is true for all Christ's followers in different ways – Paul tells us to be "patient". This is a very positive and active kind of patience, not a passive endurance. It has been described as 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.

**I have decided to follow Jesus;
I have decided to follow Jesus;
I have decided to follow Jesus;
No turning back, no turning back.⁴**

¹ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*

² Edward Mote

³ Katharina von Schlegel, translated by Jane Laurie Borhwick

⁴ This song is the last words of an Indian Christian martyred in Assam. His family were the only believers in his village, and the village chief had the man's children and wife killed in an effort to make him deny Christ. But the Christian simply affirmed his faith with words which later became the village's song, when many others, including the chief, had decided to follow Jesus.

Prayer

DAY 3

Romans 12:12

*Joyful hope lifts us over present affliction, and patient endurance is maintained by steadfastness in prayer, mutual and individual.*¹

Prayer is our lifeline. It is one of the main channels through which God pours out His promised strength and grace into our lives. Without prayer, we are like an astronaut walking in space who has got cut off from their spaceship; we are floating aimlessly, flailing around helplessly, and our limited supplies of resources will soon be exhausted.

It is through prayer that we can endure our afflictions with “brave patience” and amaze unbelievers by rejoicing in hope even while we are suffering.

Many of us struggle to pray as we know we should. We realise that talking with our heavenly Father is vital but still it drops down our list of priorities. Or we find the time but then cannot still our racing thoughts enough even to speak to God, let alone listen to Him.

That is why praying with other believers is so important. Thanks to video-

conferencing, the Covid-19 lockdown has not prevented Christians from praying together. Jesus told us to pray privately in our own room with the door shut (Matthew 6:6) but also promised that “where two or three come together in my Name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:20). In God’s wonderful economy, when two or three weak and prayerless Christians gather together to pray, each somehow finds strength and encouragement from the others, the sacrifice of praise (Hebrews 13:15) rises, the intercessions build on each other, and each pray-er leaves strengthened and ready to endure.

Have we trials and temptations?

Is there trouble anywhere?

We should never be discouraged

Take it to the Lord in prayer

Can we find a friend so faithful

Who will all our sorrows share?

Jesus knows our every weakness

*Take it to the Lord in prayer*²

1 R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, Columbus, Ohio, Wartburg Press, 1945, p. 771.

2 Joseph M. Scriven

Diligence

DAY 4

Romans 12:11

*Eternal God ... Grant us so to know you that we may truly love you, and so to love you that we may fully serve you, whom to serve is perfect freedom.*¹

Paul urges us to be diligent in serving the Lord, never putting off to tomorrow what can and should be done today.

In his efforts to express the energy we should have for the Lord’s work, he adds that we should be spiritually seething or boiling! For this is a more accurate translation of the unusual Greek word he uses in the second part of verse 11, often translated more tamely as “be aglow”.

This verse finishes with a command which translated literally says “As regards the Lord – slaving.” Paul lived in a world where slavery was an everyday fact. But “slaving” did not in those days imply excessively hard or degrading labour, and some slaves held very senior and responsible white-collar positions. The key thing about “slaving” in the first century was that everything done was directed by the master’s will. A slave took all their orders from their master or mistress, and never acted as their own master. At the very beginning

of his letter to the Romans, Paul calls himself a slave (*doulos*) of Christ (Romans 1:1). As Christians we are all slaves of Christ our beloved Master. What a privilege to serve Him! Let us do so with the greatest diligence and fervour.

Interestingly, some manuscripts give *kairos* (time) instead of *kurios* (Lord) at the end of verse 11. Martin Luther was amongst those who embraced the *kairos* version and saw these words as a command to serve the time in which we are living. Perhaps this could be in the sense of the command to be “redeeming the time, because the days are evil” (Ephesians 5:16, KJV), taking every opportunity to be salt and light in a corrupt society, living counter-cultural godly lives.

*O Jesus, I have promised to serve thee to the end Be thou forever near me, my Master and my Friend.*²

1 Augustine of Hippo

2 John Ernest Bode

Generosity

DAY 5

Romans 12:13

Teach us, good Lord, to serve you as you deserve, to give and not to count the cost, to fight and not to heed the wounds, to toil and not to seek for rest, to labour and not to ask for any reward, save that of knowing that we do your will.

In verse 13, Paul looks at the practical needs of God's suffering people. When Paul wrote this letter he was himself on the way to Jerusalem carrying a financial gift for the poor Christians there, an offering donated by the Christians of Macedonia and Achaia (Romans 15:25-28).

The literal translation of Paul's first command in verse 13 is "As regards the needs of the saints – fellowshiping!" For it is a word derived from *koinonia* that Paul wrote to indicate 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 Paul saw fellowship as including practical help for needy believers. It is the same meaning as that used by Christians of some traditions today when they give a gift to the visiting preacher accompanied by the words, "This is to have fellowship with you."

If that is what Paul meant by "fellowship", what did he mean by "saints"? It is a word that always appears in the plural in the New Testament. As we saw on Day 2, Christians do not belong to the world, and this is the basic meaning of *hagioi* (saints). We are set apart by God and for God. It is not a status we have achieved ourselves and it does not mean we are perfect.

It should be natural for saints to care for each other's practical needs.

**Brother, let me be your servant
Let me be as Christ to you
Pray that I may have the grace
To let you be my servant, too'**

1 Richard Gillard

Hospitality

DAY 6

Romans 12:13

Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. (Hebrews 13:2)

From giving money to needy Christians, Paul now moves to giving hospitality (literally, "love of strangers"). What he actually wrote was "giving the hospitality". It was not any old hospitality that Paul referred to, but a specific hospitality known to the Christians in Rome and regularly practised. It was the hospitality offered to fellow-believers whether travelling preachers like Paul, or messengers, or those fleeing anti-Christian persecution, some of whom were destitute. As strangers and pilgrims in a hostile world, Christians had of necessity to care for each other and to provide for each other's needs.

This kind of hospitality has to be pursued, said Paul, using a word that can equally well be translated "persecuted". He wants us to think of hunting down this hospitality or chasing it as a hound follows the scent, refusing to be deterred or distracted. Perhaps he is remembering his early life and the zeal with which he tracked down

Christians to persecute them.

Pagan society marvelled at the way the early Christians would treat fellow-Christians like blood brothers, although they had never set eyes on each other before. Although it should be the norm, it is now rare enough for Christians to marvel at it too. In February 2020, Gabriel and his family were made homeless when there was a violent attack on his village in Burkina Faso, but Barnabas Fund sent practical aid. Gabriel responded: "You gave us clothes, shelter and food. Christians we don't even know are sending us some various help. This is strengthening our faith and giving us the sense of the real body of Christ."

Jesus Christ was homeless, wandering on His own.

But He says you saw, ran out and brought Him home.

When did we do that? Lord, when did we see?

Welcoming the least of Mine was when you welcomed Me.¹

1 Caroline Kerslake

Empathy

DAY 7

Romans 12:15

"We never expected to get these foods. The Scripture says when you see your brother in mourning you also mourn with him. Barnabas has mourned with us and we are so grateful."

Paul tells us to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. Christians should not be people who shrink from the pain of empathy with those who are suffering. They should not be those who refuse to watch, listen or read about the afflictions of others lest it cast a shadow of sadness on them too. Peter calls us to be tenderhearted to each other (1 Peter 3:8 NKJV). Jesus Himself wept with Lazarus's bereaved sisters (John 11:35) in a complete act of identification, even though he was about to raise their brother from the dead so tears would no longer be needed.

Rejoicing with those who rejoice can be even more of a challenge than weeping with those who weep. Chrysostom, one of the Early Church Fathers, who died in 407 AD, wrote that to rejoice with other people in their success "requires a

very noble soul, so as not to keep from envying, but even to feel pleasure with the person who is in esteem".

But rejoicing with those who rejoice is also applicable in times of trouble. On Day 1 we saw how, earlier in the letter to the Romans, Paul wrote of rejoicing in our sufferings because of the fruit that would be produced in our characters (Romans 5:4). Likewise, James tells us to "consider it pure joy ... whenever you face trials of many kinds" because the testing of our faith helps us to mature as Christians. (James 1:2-4).

*I will weep when you are weeping
When you laugh I'll laugh with you
I will share your joy and sorrow
Till we've seen this journey through²*

¹ Ayuba Adamu, from Hura, a Christian village in Nigeria that was attacked on 14 April 2020. Nine Christians were killed in the attack, including three small children and a pregnant woman, 21 houses were completely burnt and seven others damaged. Barnabas Fund sent aid.

² Richard Gillard

Do to others what you would have them do to you. (Matthew 7:12)

Paul calls on believers to live in harmony with each other – a proactive harmony based on a mindset of wanting the best for other people (verse 16). It is a mindset that is blind to class, caste, status, race, wealth or rank, a mindset so focused on the wellbeing of others that there is no place for conceit or personal ambition.

Moving on from the idea of Christians living peaceably together, Paul urges us to live as peaceably as possible with everyone, even our enemies and persecutors (verse 18). So we must not retaliate when we are hurt, or, as Paul expresses it, we must not give back evil for evil (verse 17). This was the revolutionary teaching of Jesus who told us to love our enemies and pray for them (Matthew 5:43-44). Our lives and conduct should be admirable in the eyes of unbelievers, even though so startling that they may think us crazy. If, by God's grace, we can subdue the basic human instinct for taking revenge, we are a powerful witness for the Gospel.

Love

DAY 8

Romans 12:16-21

What might be the result of showing love to an enemy? Paul uses an Eastern turn of phrase about heaping burning coals on their head. This probably indicates the enemy's painful transition to repentance for the evil they have done. Our love could change our enemy. Love hopes all things (1 Corinthians 13:7), so no enemy is beyond hope. God was wonderfully patient as He brought each of us to repentance and faith.

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

Spirit-filled souls are ablaze for God. They love with a love that glows. They serve with a faith that kindles. They serve with a devotion that consumes. They hate sin with fierceness that burns. They rejoice with a joy that radiates. Love is perfected in the Fire of God. Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

¹ Samuel Chadwick