

# Life Together...



CALLED INTO  
THE COMMUNITY  
OF FAITH

## The Fellowship of Suffering

Isaiah 53:4; I Peter 4:13; Hebrews 10:32-34

The title of this current series is *Life Together: Called into the Community of Faith*. It having been three weeks since the last sermon in the series was preached I thought we might profit from a review of the main points of the first ten sermons. See how much you remember. First, when it comes to the Church, to think correctly is to think **corporately**. As Millard Erickson puts it, "There is no such thing as an isolated, solitary Christian life" (*Christian Theology*, p. 1039). Second, the Bible teaches that we share a **common life** in Christ. We are joined to Jesus in both a representative and vital union. Third, the **gospel** alone is the essential mark of the true church. One theologian (J. A. O. Preus) has written, "It is the presence of this Gospel, in its verbal [and] visible forms (i.e., Word and Sacrament), that identifies the Church of Jesus Christ and distinguishes it from every other organization or sect." Fourth, maturity in the body of Christ is measured, not according to human standards of "success" but by the presence of the enduring virtues of **faith**, **hope**, and **love**. Fifth, the Lord Jesus Christ has established His Church in the world for the **gathering** and **perfecting** of the saints through the proclamation of the Gospel. Sixth, the metaphors used in the New Testament to describe the fellowship of God's people - building, bride, and body - reinforce the idea that the Christian life is actually **designed** by God to be

lived in community. Seventh, “every member of Christ is, therefore, by the nature of the case under **obligation** to perform certain **duties** which conduce to the good of all members of the body” (G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, p. 197). I chose to preach separate sermons on four of these mutual obligations. In the eighth sermon I argued that the goal of mutual encouragement is that we all come to the **end** of our days still in the faith; that we all continue day by day in hearty **reliance** upon the promises of God in Christ; that we all live lives **consistent** with our calling as Christians. In the ninth sermon we saw that spiritual gifts are a sacred trust *to* the believer *for* the **body**. The big idea in my tenth sermon, “Sharing Possessions”, was that true generosity (out of *gratitude to* God and for the *glory of* God) is an evidence of the **grace** of God at work within a congregation.

This morning we are instructed by the Word of God as to our responsibility to share the sufferings and burdens of one another. That such is our mutual obligation is abundantly clear from Scripture. **I Corinthians 12:25b-26a**, *the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it.* **Galatians 6:2**, *Bear one another’s burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ.* We will examine this subject under three headings. First, Christ has suffered for us, **bearing** all our burdens. Second, we are called to **share** His sufferings. Third, we share in the fellowship of His sufferings as we **identify** with other believers who suffer.

First, Christ has suffered for us, **bearing** all our burdens. This is the glorious message of the gospel. **Isaiah 53:4ab**, *surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried.* **Isaiah 53:11ef**, *My Servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities.* **Isaiah 53:12**, *Yet He Himself bore the sin of many.* **I Peter 2:24**, *And*

*He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross. Hebrews 9:28, Christ also having been offered once to bear the sins of many.*

Certainly one of the most graphic and memorable images in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is that of Christian laboring under the weight of the burden on his back; the burden of sin and guilt. And, of course, for all who have read and enjoyed Bunyan's allegory - second only to his entrance into the Celestial City itself - the episode where he is relieved of his burden may be the most stirring to the redeemed soul. These are Bunyan's words:

Now I saw in my dream, that the highway up which CHRISTIAN was to go was fenced on either side with a wall; and that wall was called "Salvation". Up this way, therefore, did burdened CHRISTIAN run; but not without great difficulty, because of the load on his back. He ran thus till he came at a place somewhat ascending; and upon that place stood a Cross, and a little below, in the bottom, a sepulchre. So I saw in my dream, that just as CHRISTIAN came up to the cross, his burden loosed from off his shoulders, and fell from off his back, and began to tumble; and so continued to do till it came to the mouth of the sepulchre, where it fell in, and I saw it no more. Then was CHRISTIAN glad and lightsome, and said, with a merry heart, "He hath given me rest by his sorrow, and life by his death." Then he stood still awhile to look and wonder; for it was very surprising to him, that the sight of the cross should thus ease him of his burden. He looked therefore, and looked again, even till the springs that were in his head sent the waters down his cheeks. Now, as he stood looking and weeping, behold three shining ones came to him, and saluted him with, "Peace be to thee!" So the first said to him, "Thy sins be forgiven thee"; the second stripped him of his rags, and clothed him with change of raiment; the third also set a mark in his forehead, and

gave him a roll with a seal upon it, which he bade him look on as he ran, and that he should give it in at the Celestial Gate: so they went their way. Then CHRISTIAN gave three leaps for joy and went on singing: "Thus far did I come laden with my sin, Nor could aught ease the grief that I was in, Till I came hither. What a place is this! Must here be the beginning of my bliss! Must here the burden fall from off my back! Must here the strings that bound it to me crack! Blest cross! blest sepulchre! blest rather be The Man that there was put to shame for me!"

"And I saw it no more." The burden of sin and guilt is lifted; it is removed at the place of the cross and the tomb. Our sins do not inexplicably vanish. The burden does not fall from us in some unknown way, by some unknown agency, into some unknown place, for some unknown reason. Indeed, the burden of our sin was transferred to and borne by Christ on the cross. He carried it into the tomb. And He rose on the third day free from that awful and damning burden.

And what a horrible load it was; a ponderous weight of anguish, disappointment, failure, grief, loss, pain, regret, sorrow, tears, guilt, and condemnation. So awful that it separated us from God. As long as we bore the burden, as repulsive as the foulest stench or the most gruesome sight, we were abhorrent to God. So awful that it rendered us guilty before God. The burden consisted of so many violations of God's law piled one on the other buckling us under its weight. So awful that it occasioned untold pain and grief. So awful that it rendered us liable to the wrath of God - the incinerating fire of His righteous anger - unless something be done.

And it was God, in infinite mercy, who intervened to relieve us of the burden. **Matthew 1:21**, "*And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He*

*who will save His people from their sins.*" Jesus came that He might bear the awful burden for us. Voluntarily did He assume the load. Willingly did He take it upon Himself. Hear this third verse of Kelly's great hymn, *Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted*: "Ye who think of sin but lightly nor suppose the evil great here may view its nature rightly, here its guilt may estimate. Mark the sacrifice appointed, see who bears the awful load; 'tis the Word, the Lord's Anointed, Son of Man and Son of God." Our Savior did not bear a portion of the load. Spafford got it right. "My sin not in part but the whole is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more" (*It Is Well with My Soul*). Our Savior did not assist us by bearing the load for a little distance only to transfer it back to us. Jesus did not inspire us that we might bear it better ourselves. He did not deceive us into thinking that we had no burden or that our burden consisted of something other than that of sin and guilt.

No, He took the entire detestable load of every elect sinner upon Himself. The entire load was none of Christ's. He had no sin, no guilt, no corruption, no iniquity to bear. All such things borne by Christ were ours not His own. God the Father did not ignore or overlook our sin. God the Father did not compromise His infinite justice. He did not denigrate His law. He placed every ounce of the burden as it was on His own Son. With every curse from angry lips, with every puncture from spike-like thorns, with every blow from clinched fists, with every lash of the whip, with every penetration of the nails through His flesh, with every minute of the six-hour torture ... the wrath of God against sin was poured out upon and borne by the Son of God who suffered and died as the Sin-bearer. And, as we are in Him, we are forever free; eternally relieved of that terrible load.

Second, we are called to share in Christ's sufferings. This too is the glorious message of the gospel. **I Peter 2:21**, *For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps.* **Philippians 1:29**, *For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake.* **Philippians 3:10**, *that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death.* **Romans 8:17**, *indeed we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him.* **I Peter 4:13**, *But to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing.*

We will be exploring the many dimensions of suffering throughout our study of I Peter next year. For this sermon one statement taken from John Piper must suffice. "Therefore all suffering, of every kind, that we endure in the path of our Christian calling is a suffering *with Christ* and *for Christ*" (*Desiring God*, p.216). And the issue is not so much the reality of suffering and hardship but the reason for it. God in infinite wisdom has indeed called us to suffering, to hardship, to difficulty and trial – granted them to us as gifts - that we might be satisfied in Christ alone (Phil. 3:8); that He might wean us from our fatal attraction to temporal things; that He might create in us an intense appetite for heaven (II Cor. 4:17-18, 5:1-4); that we might know more intimately the presence and love of Christ (Phil. 3:10; Heb. 12:6); that we might taste His faithfulness (I Pet. 4:19); that we might be more assured that nothing can *separate us from the love of Christ* (Rom. 8:35); that we might know the consolations of Christ and be made fit to receive the same (II Cor. 1:3-5); that we might learn the help of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:26); that God's glorious perfections might be manifested in sustaining and preserving the suffering saints (I Pet. 1:5-6); that lovely virtues may be developed in the saint; that pride and sinful habits might be broken; that His

common mercies no longer be taken for granted (we never realize the preciousness until stripped away); that His word might be vindicated; that we might be compelled to walk that Calvary road which we have heretofore refused to travel; that He might obliterate our wretched self-dependence; that our hearts might be made big with sympathy for the sorrows of others; that we may discover that His grace is sufficient for every weakness (II Cor. 12:9); that we might learn obedience and patience (Rom. 8:24-25); that we might be humbled (II Cor. 12:7); that the gospel might advance; that the church might be built up (Col. 1:24); that we might be more like Christ (Heb. 12:10); that the power of God might be demonstrated in and through weak vessels (II Cor. 4:7, 12:9); that others might see Jesus in us (II Cor. 4:11); that we might be content (II Cor. 12:10); that we might know the peaceable fruit of righteousness (Heb. 12:11). It is for these reasons that Peter can say, *But to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing.*

Third, we share in the fellowship of His sufferings as we identify with other believers who suffer. Jerry Bridges explains this well. "As Saul of Tarsus was on his way to Damascus to persecute the believers in that city, he was confronted by the risen Christ. He heard the voice of Jesus saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?" In answer to Saul's question, "Who are you, Lord?" Jesus replied, "I am Jesus, who you are persecuting" (Acts 9:4-5). Now the record is distinctly clear that Saul had already been persecuting the Lord's disciples and that he was on his way, at that moment to persecute them again in Damascus. Yet Jesus asked Saul, "Why do you persecute Me?" Jesus so clearly identified with His people that persecution of them was essentially persecution of Jesus Himself, even though He was then seated at the right hand of His Father ... We

are so intimately united with Christ that what affects us affects Him" (*The Crisis of Caring*, pp. 158-159).

"Now since Christ regards the suffering of believers as His suffering, it follows that we can share in the fellowship of His sufferings as we identify with other believers who suffer. The writer of Hebrews said to his readers, "Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated" (Hebrews 10:33). The phrase "stood side by side with" is the NIV translation of the Greek word *koinonoi*, meaning literally "companions" or "partners." The writer of Hebrews was saying that his readers had identified with other believers so closely that they stood side by side with them as partners in their sufferings. They literally had fellowship with them in their sufferings. Through this relationship they shared in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings" (p. 159).

I have selected one poignant historical example to illustrate what I believe is meant by identification with other believers in their sufferings. I defer to John Piper to tell the story (*The Roots of Endurance*).

"John Newton was born July 24, 1725, in London to a godly mother and an irreligious, seafaring father. His mother died when he was six. Left mainly to himself, Newton became a debauched sailor – a miserable outcast on the coast of West Africa for two years; a slave-trading sea-captain until an epileptic seizure ended his career; a well-paid "surveyor of tides" in Liverpool; a loved pastor of two congregations in Olney and London for forty-three years; a devoted husband to Mary for forty years until she died in 1790; a personal friend to William Wilberforce, Charles Simeon, Henry Martyn, William Carey, John Wesley, and George Whitefield; and, finally, the author of the most famous



hymn in the English language, "Amazing Grace." He died on December 21, 1807, at the age of eighty-two" (p.41).

"In writing to a friend [Newton] describes the believer's life: 'He believes and feels his own weakness and unworthiness, and lives upon the grace and pardoning love of his Lord. This gives him an habitual tenderness and gentleness of spirit' " (p. 53).

"The most remarkable instance of this was, of course, William Cowper, the mentally-ill poet and hymn writer who came to live in Olney during twelve of Newton's sixteen years there (1764-1779). Newton took Cowper into his home for five months during one season and fourteen months during another when he was so depressed it was hard for him to function alone. In fact, Richard Cecil said that over Newton's whole lifetime, "His house was an asylum for the perplexed or afflicted." Newton says of Cowper's stay: "For nearly twelve years we were seldom separated for seven hours at a time when we were awake and at home: the first six (years) I passed daily admiring and aiming to imitate him: during the second six, I walked pensively with him in the valley of the shadow of death" (pp. 55-56).

"When Cowper's brother died in 1770, Newton resolved to help Cowper by collaborating with him in writing hymns for the church. These came to be known as "The Olney Hymns." But soon Cowper was emotionally unable to carry through his part of the plan. Newton pressed on, writing one hymn a week without Cowper until there were well over three hundred. Sixty-seven are attributed to William Cowper. The last hymn that Cowper composed for The Olney Hymns was "God Moves in a Mysterious Way," which he entitled "Light Shining out of Darkness." The next day, in January 1773, he sank into the

blackest depression and never went to hear Newton preach again. Newton preached his funeral sermon seven years later and explained what happened and how he responded" (p. 56)

"He drank tea with me in the afternoon. The next morning a violent storm overtook him ... I used to visit him often but no argument could prevail with him to come and see me. He used to point with his finger to the church and say: "You know the comfort I have had there and how I have seen the glory of the Lord in His house, and until I go there I'll not go anywhere else." He was one of those who came out of great tribulations. He suffered much here for twenty-seven years, but eternity is long enough to make amends for all. For what is all he endured in this life, when compared with the rest which remaineth for the children of God" (pp. 56-57).

"What would most of us have done with a depressed person who could scarcely move out of his house? William Jay summed up Newton's response: "He had the tenderest disposition; and always judiciously regarded his friend's depression and despondency as a physical effect, for the removal of which he prayed, but never reasoned or argued with him concerning it" (p. 57).

The specific situations we ourselves may encounter are as varied as the people in the church. Even today saints struggle with difficult marriages, wayward children, unemployment, aging, the care of elderly parents, sin, sickness, lack of money, and so on. How shall we walk with one another in each of these as Newton walked with Cowper? There are several obvious practical steps. We must acquaint ourselves with one another. Not a few join the church and like Chinese astronauts orbit the place, distanced and detached from any real acquaintance with or involvement in the lives of the saints - unaware of needs;

cultivating no relationships so deep that they sense a primary obligation in them. We must surely pray for one another in our difficulties (James 5:13-16). We can meet specific needs that arise from suffering. In his book *The Crisis of Caring* Jerry Bridges mentions a practice of his own family to illustrate this. He says, "Our family, for example, has given through one mission agency to provide financial aid to the families of believers who have been imprisoned for the gospel" (p. 164). Finally, we are called to identify with the strugglers accepting the risks that attend such association. **Hebrews 10:32-34**, *But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, partly, by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated. For you showed sympathy to the prisoners, and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and an abiding one.*

The ultimate answer we will explore when we come to the Lord's Table after we sing together.

As we approach the Lord's Table I want you to look at two verses from the Book of Hebrews with me. The first is found in **Hebrews 10**. From verse 33 we learn that some in the fellowship to whom this letter was written were suffering by reason of their identification with others of their number who were being ill-treated. **Verse 34** explains, *for you showed **sympathy** to the prisoners*. The word for sympathy is the Greek verb *sumpatheo*. *Sumpatheo* means to suffer with another. Ours for one another are to be what one called "sympathetic sufferings." We are to have "fellow-feelings" for those who suffer; to stand side by side with one another in our respective trials and difficulties. Such suffering is classic, vintage Christianity because its roots are traceable to Jesus Himself.

We see this in the second verse, **Hebrews 4:15**. *For we do not have a high priest who cannot **sympathize** with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.* The word for “sympathize” here is the same Greek verb, *sumpatheo*. The King James Version translates 4:15 like this: *For we have not an high priest which cannot **be touched with the feeling of our infirmities**.* Pastor Kent Hughes offers this commentary: “Whatever we may be going through, there is not a note we can play, not a melody or a dirge, no minor key, no discordant note, that does not evoke a ‘sympathetic resonance’ in Jesus.” Jesus Christ, the Son of God, embraced and made our weaknesses His own. *Sumpatheo* suggests more than feelings of sorrow. It includes action brought about by those feelings. So closely did Christ identify with us as fallen sons of Adam that He took on humanity, living as a child of dust on the earth. This staggering truth is dramatically and yet beautifully portrayed in the Sacrament. The bread and the cup, symbolic of His body and blood, represent to us the price of such identification with sinners. It cost Him His life. Relieved by Christ’s vicarious sufferings of the burden of sin for eternity, we are now free to help one another in and through the temporal burdens of time for Christ’s sake.

Although the Lord’s Supper is appropriately celebrated in the context of an open assembly, reception of the elements is restricted to and designed for the spiritual benefit of professing Christians. There are among us those who have made such a profession and those who have not. We extend a warm and sincere invitation to all. Those who profess Christ, who have received Christian baptism, and who are members in good standing of a faithful church we invite to this Table.

All others we warmly invite to remain among us and to use this time to consider Jesus Christ as He is offered to you in the gospel.

**Luke 22:14-20**, *And when the hour came, he reclined at table, and the apostles with him.*

<sup>15</sup> *And he said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. <sup>16</sup> For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." <sup>17</sup> And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, "Take this, and divide it among yourselves. <sup>18</sup> For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." <sup>19</sup> And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." <sup>20</sup> And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.*

Our Father, as we reflect upon the sympathetic sufferings of the Savior for Your people, move us out of our dreadful complacency and cultivate in us tender mutual sympathy that reflects, that echoes, and leaves the sweet, lingering scent of the sympathy of Your Son for rebellious and unlovely sinners. Do this we pray in the name of Jesus that He might be honored among us and before the world. Amen.

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### Review

When it comes to the Church, to think correctly is to think \_\_\_\_\_.

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The \_\_\_\_\_ alone is the essential mark of the true church.

Maturity in the body of Christ is measured, not according to human standards of “success” but by the presence of the enduring virtues of \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

The Lord Jesus Christ has established His Church in the world for the \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ of the saints through the proclamation of the Gospel.

The metaphors used in the New Testament to describe the fellowship of God’s people - building, bride, and body - reinforce the idea that the Christian life is actually \_\_\_\_\_ by God to be lived in community.

“Every member of Christ is, therefore, by the nature of the case under \_\_\_\_\_ to perform certain \_\_\_\_\_ which conduce to the good of all members of the body” (G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, p. 197).

The goal of mutual encouragement is that we all come to the **end** of our days still in the faith; that we all continue day by day in hearty **reliance** upon the promises of God in Christ; that we all live lives **consistent** with our calling as Christians.

Spiritual gifts are a sacred trust *to* the believer *for* the \_\_\_\_\_.

True generosity (out of *gratitude to* God and for the *glory of* God) is an evidence of the \_\_\_\_\_ of God at work within a congregation.

### **The Fellowship of Suffering** (I Cor. 12:25b-26a; Gal. 6:2)

**First**, Christ has suffered for us, \_\_\_\_\_ all our burdens (Is. 53; I Pet. 2:24; Heb. 9:28).

**Second**, we are called to \_\_\_\_\_ in Christ's sufferings (I Pet. 2:21; Phil. 1:29, 3:10; Rom. 8:17; I Pet. 4:13).

**Third**, we share in the fellowship of His sufferings as we \_\_\_\_\_ with other believers who suffer (Heb. 10:32-34).

### **Practical steps**

We must \_\_\_\_\_ ourselves with one another.

We must surely \_\_\_\_\_ for one another in our difficulties (James 5:13-16).

We can \_\_\_\_\_ specific needs that arise from suffering.

We are called to \_\_\_\_\_ with the strugglers accepting the \_\_\_\_\_ that attend such association (**Heb. 10:32-34**).

### **The Lord's Supper**