

Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

The Year of Saint Paul

Part 8: Saint Paul and Suffering¹

Suffering, like death, is one of the few unavoidable parts of life. It can take many forms—physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual—and it is unique for every single person. No two people suffer in exactly the same way. However, regardless of the type or depth of our suffering, we can learn a lot about how we should respond to it from Saint Paul, whom we might call a “professional sufferer.”

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul speaks very openly about the sufferings he has endured as an Apostle for Christ. He mentions how he endured imprisonments, beatings, brushes with death, lashes, stoning, and shipwrecks, to name a few.² Saint Paul understood his suffering to be a sign of his relationship with Christ. Because of this, he did not simply endure suffering, he rejoiced in it. His rejoicing in the midst of suffering had an enormous impact on the early Christians. In the fourth century, Saint John Chrysostom wrote about the power of Paul's joyful suffering—

Amid the traps set for him by his enemies, with exultant heart [Paul] turned their every attack into a victory for himself; constantly beaten, abused and cursed, he boasted of it as though he were celebrating a triumphal procession and taking trophies home, and offered thanks to God for it all: “Thanks be to God who is always victorious in us!” This is why he was far more eager for the shameful abuse that his zeal in preaching brought upon him than we are for the most pleasing honors, more eager for death than we are for life, for poverty than we are for wealth; he yearned for toil far more than others yearn for rest after toil. The one thing he feared, indeed dreaded, was to offend God; nothing else could sway him. Therefore, the only thing he really wanted was always to please God.

In this short paragraph, Saint John described the essence of Paul—he was a man who was able to take glory in suffering because he knew God's love for him! As this quality was central to the life of Paul, our faith draws us ever more quickly toward making this quality central to our lives as well. If we desire to live life well, we must learn to suffer well. If we desire to suffer well, then we only have to look to Saint Paul to learn how.

Paul was able to rejoice in his suffering because he understood that suffering brought him a new depth of love with Christ. He spelled out clearly how suffering leads to the love of God in his letter to the Romans.

We even boast of our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope, and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

-Romans 5:3-5

In order for our suffering to lead us into rejoicing, our hearts must be set upon Christ. We must remember His eternal love for us. We must allow our suffering to lead us to the foot of His cross and savor the intimacy we find in that painful, yet hope-filled place. This is precisely what Saint Paul did and it caused him to rejoice, despite his suffering.

¹ In honor of the “Year of Saint Paul,” this is part eight of a ten part series on his life and writings.

² 2 Corinthians 11:23-28