

## THE FELLOWSHIP OF HIS SUFFERINGS

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September 30, 2001

### Scripture Reading: Philippians 3:10

I want to talk about emotions today. We are often taught that, as Christians, we must be careful not to live by our emotions. We must live by the truth of God's Word whether or not we feel like it.

This, of course, is absolutely true. When it comes to making decisions of what we ought or ought not to do, we must live by faith in God's Word and not by our feelings. However, today I would like to stress the importance of feelings. I would like us all to consider emotion as being a normal part of the Christian life. It is true that our decisions should be based on truth and not feeling; however, it is also true that our trust in the Word of God should cause certain emotions to flood our souls.

I have to admit that I often lack the feelings I should have as I strive to live the Christian life by the grace of God. But I should desire to have certain emotions. I should recognize that, without certain emotions, I am failing to reach the level of Christian living that God wants me to reach.

At the end of the Apostle Paul's life, he wrote an amazing statement that I would like us to think about today. At the end of his life, this great saint of God said, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings." That verse is recorded in Philippians 3:10.

Please notice the order of things in this "wish list." First of all, to know Christ. To know Christ is to know truth, because Christ is truth. But Paul didn't only want to understand truth, he wanted to live according to the truth. Thus, his second wish was to experience the power of Christ's resurrection so that he could live according to the truth he knew. And, then finally, we come to the third wish. It is to the desire to know the fellowship of sharing in Christ's sufferings. I believe this to be the emotional part of the wish list. The greatest suffering that our Lord experienced was not physical. The emotional suffering He faced was far more difficult to bear than the physical suffering. I believe that our Lord was a very emotional person. His emotions were completely and perfectly in tact with His will. Jesus Christ never failed to yield His will to do the will of God. And His emotions perfectly reflected the heart of God.

The fact that many of us appear to show no emotion whatsoever as we go about doing God's will is not a sign of strength. We give people the idea that it is a sign of strength, because we say, "I am living by faith and not by feeling." However, we must realize that it is possible to live by faith and still have feeling. In fact, it is not only possible, it should be considered normal and right. When we have no feelings, then we are not living on the highest plane possible for a Christian to live on.

I must desire to know God. Then I must desire to obey God whether or not I feel like it. But then, I should desire to experience the kind of emotions that should come to a person who is committed to knowing and doing the will of God.

And what kind of emotions am I talking about? What did the Apostle Paul mean when he said, "*I want to know the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings?*" The emotion that is being emphasized here is not anger or happiness. Certainly Jesus did experience those kinds of emotions. But the word "suffering" makes us think of a broken heart. It is the heart of a Shepherd who has lost a sheep or a Father who has lost a son. I believe the emotional suffering emphasized here happens when holiness comes in contact with evil.

As I study the life of my Lord in the gospels, I find that He suffered emotionally whenever he saw people in bondage to sin. In my imagination, I can see tears coming down His face as He looked at the crowds of people and said, "They are like lost sheep without a shepherd." I am sure that sadness filled His heart when the prostitute was brought to Him and He was challenged to uphold the law that demanded she be put to death. What was Jesus feeling when bent down and wrote words in the dust? He said, "Whoever is without sin should cast the first stone." Some have speculated that Jesus was writing down the secret sins of those who condemned the prostitute and

that is why they began to leave one at a time. Whether or not he wrote down their sins, we will never know. But He certainly was aware of their sins, and I am sure that awareness gave Him no pleasure. And then I see Him on the cross, looking down upon those who had treated Him with such cruelty, and I hear Him cry out in anguish, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." I believe every time Jesus came in contact with sin, His heart was filled with anguish.

How well do we know this kind of emotion? Have we become so programmed to laugh at sin that we no longer know how to cry?

Every day in our schools cruel things take place. All too often we ignore them or, because of peer pressure, we even participate in them. Listen as I read excerpts from a ballad written by Cheryl Costello-Forshey as she describes the kind of cruelty that goes on at schools. It is entitled, "Making Sarah Cry."

He stood among his friends from school,  
He joined their childhood games  
Laughing as they played kickball  
And when they called poor Sarah names.

The funny faces that she made  
And the way she'd stomp her feet  
Whenever they mocked the way she walked  
Or the stutter when she'd speak.

To him she must deserve it  
Because she never tried to hide.  
And if she truly wanted to be left alone,  
Then she should stay inside.

But every day she'd do the same:  
She'd come outside to play,  
And stand there, tears upon her face,  
Too upset to run away.

The game would soon be over  
As tears dropped from her eyes,  
For the purpose of their fun  
Was making Sarah cry.

It was nearly two whole months  
He hadn't seen his friends.  
He was certain they all must wonder  
What happened and where he'd been

So he felt a little nervous  
As he limped his way to class.  
He hoped no one would notice,  
He prayed on one would ask

About that awful day:  
The day his bike met with a car,  
Leaving him with a dreadful limp  
And a jagged-looking scar.

So he held his breath a little  
As he hobbled into the room,  
Where inside he saw a "Welcome Back" banner

And lots of red balloons.

He felt a smile cross his face  
As his friends all smiled, too  
And he couldn't wait to play outside—  
His favorite thing to do.

So the second that he stepped outdoors  
And saw his friends all waiting there,  
He expected a few pats on the back—  
Instead, they all stood back and stared.  
An awkward smile crossed his face  
When he heard somebody laugh  
And heard the words, "Hey freak,  
Where'd you get the ugly mask?"

He turned, expecting Sarah,  
But Sarah could not be seen.  
It was the scar upon his own face  
That caused such words so mean.

The cruel remarks continued  
About the scar and then his limp.  
And he knew if he shed a single tear  
They'd label him a wimp.

And so the hurtful words went on,  
And in his heart he wondered why.  
But he knew without a doubt  
The game would never end, until they made him cry.

And just when a tear had formed,  
He heard a voice speak out from behind.  
"Leave him alone you bullies,  
Because he's a friend of mine."

He turned to see poor Sarah,  
Determination on her face,  
Sticking up for one of her own tormentors  
And willing to take his place.

And when his friends did just that,  
Trying their best to make poor Sarah cry,

This time he didn't join in,  
And at last understood exactly why.

What does it take to cause us to feel great pain inside when we see people treating other people in a cruel way? The one who really could identify with the sufferings of Christ in this ballad was Sarah. It broke her up inside to see another person being treated in a cruel way. And even though that person was one who had treated her cruelly, she was willing to take his place.

I have discovered that the more we expose ourselves to sin, the more callous we become and the more difficult it is to suffer the way our Lord suffered when He saw sin. In our society today, the typical reaction people have towards sin is anger and disgust. Such is the reaction of a certain person who is constantly being exposed to sin through television and video games. When sin finally poses a real threat to that person's life, his reaction is to have great feelings of hate and contempt towards those who are sinning. It is the person that constantly strives to fill his mind with things that are good who will be heart-broken whenever he sees a person treating another person in a cruel way. He will suffer even to the point of being willing to take the brunt of the sin in order to save the sinner.

Last week I walked into a school and saw a "wanted dead or alive" poster of Osama bin Ladin on a student's locker. Sales of guns are soaring, and people are buying targets with the image of bin Ladin to shoot at. Hate crimes are on the rise. What is happening to our emotions? Terrorists will be hunted out, and I am sure that some will be found and killed. But we don't have to feel good about that.

Jesus suffered when He saw sin. And He also suffered when people misunderstood the nature of God. How our hearts should ache when we hear people blaspheme God. Those who are closest to God know what I am talking about. When people misunderstand me, the one who suffers the most is my wife, because she is closest to me. In the same way, the closer we are to God, the more we will suffer when we see Him being misunderstood by people.

Remember the story of Lazarus whom Jesus raised from the dead? Prior from raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus looked around at all the people who were grieving without hope, and He cried. What was the reason for that display of emotion? In what way was our Lord sympathizing with the grief of the people? I can't believe He was crying over the loss of a friend, because He knew that Lazarus was not really lost and would soon be raised from the dead. But for Jesus to know that He, Himself, was the Resurrection and the Life and to see people grieving without hope in His presence must have caused Him to suffer agony. Though they believed Him to be the Messiah, they misunderstood who He really was.

The words "O my God" are now used at the drop of a hat, but few people have any real intention of trusting in God when they use those words. God has never been more misunderstood than He is today. Notes left behind by the terrorists indicate they believed in God; however, those notes also indicate that they grossly misunderstood God's true nature and His will for mankind. Most likely they had been brainwashed to misunderstand God. And such misunderstanding should cause us to feel like crying.

Jesus suffered when He saw sin, and He suffered when He saw and heard people express a misunderstanding about God. And then—what probably caused the greatest suffering of all—Jesus suffered at the thought of people receiving punishment that comes as a consequence of sin.

Jesus knew the punishment that the people of Israel would receive as a result of their sin. In Matthew 23:37 we read the words of our Lord crying out, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather you children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate." The word of punishment must be proclaimed. No violation of God's holiness can be permitted. "Desolate," He said, but as Jesus said it, His voice was choked with tears. That was not His will for Jerusalem. Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth—that is the God's desire for Jerusalem. 2 Peter 3:9 says that our Lord does not want anyone to perish, but He wants everyone to come to repentance. However, not everyone will come to repentance, and this grieves His heart and should grieve our hearts as well.

As tens of thousands of refugees stream to the boarder between Afghanistan and Pakistan relief workers are predicting that many thousands will now die. And we know that most, if not all of those people, have never had a chance to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ.

What is happening to them now is a direct result of the sins of others. What will happen to them in eternity will be a direct result of their own sins. Does the thought of someone spending eternity in hell cause us emotional pain? Shouldn't the knowledge that so many people are soon to die without salvation cause a great outpouring of prayer and witness and money for relief from the Christian community? Where are our hearts? Where are our emotions?

What I am suggesting is beyond comprehension for the average person. The kinds of emotions that our Lord felt for people seem to be far beyond our reach. Even the Apostle Paul, at the end of his life's journey, admitted that he had not yet obtained all that he desired. But he said that he wanted to press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of him. He wanted to share in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings, and he knew that the only way for him to enter into such fellowship was to become like Jesus in His death. He had to die to everything the world views as valuable. Career, reputation, and citizenship all must be counted as rubbish for the sake of being able to enter into this precious fellowship.

Everyone who calls himself a Christian should desire to share in the fellowship of Christ's emotions. And, for the most part, those emotions are feelings of agony over those living in bondage to sin and agony over those who misunderstand God and agony for those receiving or soon to receive judgment that comes as a result of sin. Though our decisions must not be based on our emotions, such emotions will add drive and determination to whatever we do. If the emotions are strong enough, they may even drive us to sacrifice our own lives in order to save the sinner.