



Editor's Note: Why Do Christians— and Specifically Pastors—Suffer? (Suffering then Glory)

by Taylor Hartley

Every captain worth his salt has encountered a storm at sea. Of course, he doesn't go looking for a storm—but sooner or later it finds him.

Storms are complicated things. They form—if you'll go back with me to sixth grade science class—based on three essential ingredients: warm moisture, unstable air, and lift. As warm, moist air is lifted higher into the sky, it cools and water vapor condenses into droplets, eventually forming a tall cumulonimbus cloud. Updrafts and downdrafts then develop inside the cloud, resulting in gusty winds, thunder, lightning, and rain. But here's the thing: when a squall assaults a captain's bow, he doesn't care about its scientific composition. He cares about his ship and his crew.

Something similar happens when a pastor encounters suffering. Instead of analyzing the causes and cures for his suffering, he instinctively thinks about protecting his family and his church. He (rightly) wants to be an example of what it looks like to trust the Lord in the midst of a storm.





The problem is, depending on the ferocity of his trial, a pastor's courage may melt within him. Suffering can bring him to his wits' end.

This issue of *Church Matters* is for you, pastor, regardless of whether you're walking through suffering right now. If you stay in ministry long enough, suffering will find you. It may be deeply personal: depression, cancer, the death of a loved one, conflict in your marriage, a wayward child. Or your suffering may be directly related to your ministry: a church split, constant criticism of your preaching, or opposition from the surrounding community. Either way, your suffering as a pastor has the added hardship of being public in nature. Your church is listening to what you say and watching how you respond. It's hard enough to be on

a ship in a storm. It's even harder when everyone else is depending on you to get them home.

In this issue, we offer a little "science," or theology, of suffering, specifically as it relates to pastors. We'll address questions like: *Why do we suffer? What purposes does God have in our suffering?* and *How does our suffering relate to our future hope?* Our primary aim, however, will be to encourage you in your suffering and equip you to care well for your fellow elders amid their trials. You will read of brothers who have suffered greatly and yet still testify to God's grace and goodness. I pray their testimonies will encourage you to stay the course, trusting that the Lord who commands the rising of the wind also delivers those who cry out to him (Ps. 107:28–29).



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Section One





A Theology of Suffering





God's Grace for Suffering Pastors

by Andy Davis

We know of no one in church history who experienced greater suffering for Christ than the apostle Paul. As Jesus Christ said of him when he was converted, “I will show him how much he must suffer for my name” (Acts 9:16). Take, for instance, Paul’s catalog of sufferings in 2 Corinthians 11:23–29, which is mind-boggling. At the same time, Christ also showed Paul continual grace. Five times we have a record of Christ standing alongside Paul to refresh and guide him at a key moment in his ministry (Acts 18:9–10, 22:17–21, 23:11, 27:23–24; 2 Tim. 4:17).

For example, Paul says he came to Corinth in “weakness, fear, and much trembling” (1 Cor. 2:3). By this time, he had experienced an array of sorrows, having been stoned and left for dead, publicly flogged and imprisoned, chased out of towns by unbelieving Jews, and laughed to scorn by the philosophers in Athens. He arrived in Corinth alone and looked around that wicked city with profound grief. He was exhausted and





depressed, wondering if he could muster enough strength to keep preaching the gospel. At that moment, the Lord Jesus Christ appeared to him in a vision: “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking and do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack you and harm you, because I have many people in this city” (Acts 18:9–10). This was a fulfillment of the beautiful image in Isaiah 40:11, which says of the Lord, “He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those who have young.”

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Renewed in strength and courage, Paul was instrumental in planting the church at Corinth. With the grace God gave him, he proclaimed the gospel in that seething cauldron of pagan lust and saw unbelievers claimed by God as eternal prizes for Christ. Perhaps, pastor, the Lord wants to do something similar for you right now. May these reflections be as if he were appearing to you and pouring his grace into your weary soul!

God’s Grace in Diagnosis

The Lord’s grace to suffering pastors begins with a clear diagnosis of the

causes of their pain. Pastors suffer for a variety of reasons. Some of them are common to everyone in this evil age (sickness, injury, weariness, natural disasters, economic forces, the varied sins of a rebellious human race, etc.), while others are common only to Christians (painful battles with our own sinfulness, temptations, persecutions by a Christless world, etc.). Some sufferings, however, are specific to the gospel ministry. I’ll list seven along with some brief comments.

1. The Constant Danger of Hypocrisy

A faithful preacher feels acutely the deficiencies in his own soul as he proclaims the Scriptures. He is aware that Jesus called the scribes and Pharisees “whitewashed tombs” because they looked beautiful on the outside but inwardly were deeply corrupt (Matt. 23:27). That relentless danger of hypocrisy causes suffering. Some of our suffering may well be warranted—we genuinely have sin to confess. But our consciences can be overactive, constantly accusing us in ways that are damaging to our ministry.

2. More Severe Judgment Promised for Teachers

James 3:1 says teachers of the Word of God will be judged with “greater strictness.” God holds pastors to a higher standard, and he will call us to account for our lives and our flocks (Heb. 13:7). “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded” (Luke 12:48). This is a very real burden that can cause suffering.





3. Increased Satanic Assaults

Pastors are also assaulted more severely by Satan. The enemy is strategic, knowing that if he can strike down the leader of the flock, the sheep will be scattered (Matt. 26:31). So we pastors often have to stand against more of Satan's flaming arrows in the form of temptation and accusation.

4. The Burden of Being an Example

Pastors are called to be "blameless" (Titus 1:6) and "examples to the flock" (1 Pet. 5:3). We must say to the sheep, "Follow me as I follow Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1). This is a significant part of discipling others, but it can lead to a feeling of relentless pressure.

5. Disappointment at Apparent Lack of Fruitfulness

Paul himself was afraid that he had labored and run in vain (1 Thes. 3:5; Gal. 2:2). When listing his catalog of sufferings, he capped it off by referring to the "daily pressure" of his "anxiety for all the churches" (2 Cor. 11:28–29). Every fruitful minister in church history has faced what *seemed* to be the failure of the Word, and this can lead to depression and/or a temptation to leave the ministry. Martin Luther gave up preaching for many months because of a perceived lack of fruit. Adoniram Judson, the great missionary to Burma, dug a symbolic grave and stared into it, in part because he had seen so little fruit from the sacrifices he made.

6. Attacks from Unhealthy (or Spiritually Dead) Church Members

Every church has a mixture of various levels of spiritual maturity. But the more unhealthy a church is, the more suffering they tend to cause their pastor. Some who oppose, argue, gossip, rebel, plot, scheme, and vote against the pastor are genuine Christians temporarily used by Satan to do his will (2 Tim. 2:26). Some are Satanic plants, what Paul calls "false brothers" (Gal. 2:4), who steal in to do the devil's work. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to tell the difference, and pastors have to teach such people with great patience, hoping the Satanic plants will be exposed and the genuine Christians transformed.

7. Attacks from the World Because of Boldness

Often the bolder a pastor is in preaching the gospel to a rebellious and perishing world, the more persecution he will experience. This fact is a source of suffering no matter how faithful a pastor is. Persecution hurts. Paul said, "I bear on my body the marks of Jesus" (Gal. 6:17). If we are not experiencing much persecution, it may well be that we are giving in to fear and shrinking back from our gospel responsibility. And that hurts too. Either way, being a pastor can be painful.

God's Grace in Healing

In light of the various ways pastors experience suffering, we need God's grace to bring healing to our souls and lives. Some of God's gracious





promises apply to all God's suffering children, while other promises speak more directly to pastors. We'll consider both.

God's Grace for All His Children in Suffering

The greatest suffering any Christian experiences in this world is dealing with the reality of their own sinfulness. We should grieve deeply whenever we grieve the Holy Spirit (Jas. 4:6; Eph. 4:3). But God's grace through the shed blood of Christ and his empty tomb are infinitely greater than all our sins. If we confess our sins, God will forgive us and cleanse us (1 John 1:9). In the ultimate sense, then, the root of our suffering has been permanently severed.

At the same time, the Bible tells us other things about our suffering that should bring us comfort. I'll mention three. First, our suffering is *temporary*, for in the new heavens and new earth there will be no more sin, death, mourning, or pain (Rev. 21:4). Second, God assures us that our suffering is *purposeful*, not random. He has a wise and loving purpose in our trials. Peter tells us explicitly that God tests the genuineness of our faith (1 Pet. 1:7) so that we can know for certain that we are truly Christians and not "rocky ground" hearers who fall away when trouble comes because of the Word (Mark 4:17). Likewise, James tells us that trials are essential to our growth in sanctification, because by them we become "mature and complete, lacking nothing" (Jas. 1:2–4). Third, we are told that our sufferings are *limited* in that we will not be tempted beyond

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our ability. God will make a “way of escape” so that we are able to endure whatever temptations and trials he brings our way (1 Cor. 10:13 ESV). All the while, Christ, our Great High Priest, will be constantly interceding for us, as he did for Peter, praying that our faith would not fail when Satan seeks to sift us like wheat (Luke 22:31–32).

God's Grace for Suffering Pastors

The encouragements and promises mentioned above are readily available for all God's children, including suffering pastors. Now I want to highlight three comforting truths from God's Word specifically tailored to a pastor's calling.

First, *God's Word cannot fail*. Suffering pastors are tempted to think that God's Word has failed (Rom. 9:6) or returned void (Isa. 55:11). That is impossible! God's purposes are hidden from our eyes, but he has exalted above all things his name and his Word (Ps. 138:2). He guarantees that his Word will achieve the purpose for which he sent it. So keep spreading God's Word faithfully, and eternity will reveal the fullness of your harvest.

Second, *God will equip you to be a fountain of hope*. Paul prays in Romans 15:13 that God would cause us





to “overflow with hope.” I commend this verse to you for intensive meditation. The God of hope intends to renew you in joy and peace as you believe in him so that you can be a fountain for thirsty, hopeless people. Jesus, speaking of the Holy Spirit, said of the ones who believe in him that “streams of living water will flow from deep *within him*” (John 7:37–39). Pastor, as you suffer, you will be a source of refreshing hope for the flock entrusted to your care.

Third, *God is empowering you for extreme effort to win an eternal crown.*

Paul compared himself to an athlete striving to win a crown at the end of a grueling race. This meant that Christ was both calling him to and equipping him for the rigors of that race so that he could wear a crown of glory for all eternity (1 Cor. 9:24–27). As you endure suffering in the ministry, remember what your labors will look like in that new creation where there will be nothing but clear displays of God’s glory in Christ. May the unique jewels of your life, fired and formed by the pressures of suffering, shine in your crown for all eternity!



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