

Facing Tribulation

DAVE BAST

One of the less popular subjects of Christian teaching, but one which the New Testament devotes a great deal of attention to, is the subject of suffering. Not just ordinary suffering, the hurts and disappointments and losses that we all experience as human beings living in this veil of tears, but rather, specifically, Christian suffering; that is to say, the pain or the loss that we experience as Christians simply for being Christians; in other words, suffering for our faith; or more often, for our obedience to Jesus. Both Jesus and the apostles talk about this a lot. They tell us to expect suffering; they tell us how to face it; and they tell us what it can do for us. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. Scott, we are continuing a series with this program of what we are calling: Bad news/good news, or sometimes good news/bad news. It is verses, often – often a single verse – that has kind of a flip to it. It states one thing and then there is the word *but*, and it turns it around and says something quite different.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Today, we are going to look at, actually, a couple of different texts; one from John's Gospel, and then from the first letter of Peter, which also hit on this theme that you already mentioned in the introduction, Dave, about suffering, and how are we to think about that and deal with it in our lives?

DAVE BAST

Right; and as I tried to make clear in the introduction, this is not any old kind of suffering. We all suffer in various ways. Eventually, if we live long enough, we get old and we get sick and we die. That is suffering. And there are little deaths along the way. I remember once hearing the great Lew Smedes, whom we both knew and admired immensely, talk about any kind of loss as a sort of death. There is physical death, but there is a death to your career; there may be a death to your family or your hopes of having a family. So, there are all of these deaths that we experience along the way, but everybody has that. What we are focusing on here, and what the New Testament wants to talk about, is suffering for being a Christian.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Jesus talked about that in the first text we are going to look at, Dave, from John 16. Listeners who are familiar with John's Gospel know that John has that very long segment – 13, 14, 15, 16, 17 – those chapters – all the discourses Jesus had in the Upper Room on the night before he was betrayed, and then the next day crucified. At one point, Jesus is talking to the disciples, and they have kind of reacted positively to Jesus, and Jesus says, and this is from John 16:31-33:

³¹“You believe at last, ³²but the time is coming, and has come when you will be scattered, each to his own home. You will leave me all alone; yet, I am not alone, for my Father is with me. ³³I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In this world, you will have trouble, but take heart; I have overcome the world.”

DAVE BAST

As it is in the older version, I like the old words, and maybe you will recognize those: In the world, you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer. I have overcome the world. So, the bad news: You are going to face trouble – tribulation, suffering – simply by being in the world; but do not lose heart; be encouraged; you can even be cheerful because I have conquered the world, Jesus says.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the disciples at this point – still, as close as we are, and we know this as readers of the Bible today – as close as we are to all of the terrible things that are going to happen to Jesus in the next 36 hours, let's say, the disciples are still not quite clear that that is what is coming. I think there is still a little optimism in their hearts that he is going to be the political leader and Messiah that they had been hoping for. All along, they have wanted him to avoid suffering. Sometimes the disciples even told Jesus, "Stop talking that way," when he would predict his crucifixion – his suffering – so, they still do not quite get it. So, Jesus is looking at the immediate future; and in the next ten hours or fewer, the disciples are going to abandon him wholesale, but Jesus is also looking farther down the road. What is going to happen there; the persecution that he endures, that they endure, is going to set the tone for the life of discipleship even beyond what Jesus knows is his own resurrection.

DAVE BAST

The rest of their lives; but again, the context is so interesting here, because Jesus has been trying in a way to prepare them for the immediate future. Somehow, he knows. The Spirit has revealed to him almost exactly what is going to happen to him. He talks about how he will be betrayed, and how he will be handed over, and he will be crucified; and he has been telling them that for a while now; and then in this passage in John, he says things that really mystify the disciples: How he is going to go away, but yet he will be with them; and they are, how can he go away and how can he still be with us? Then he starts to talk to them about the Holy Spirit; the most misunderstood Person of the Trinity; and they certainly did not understand anything about it; and finally he says something that they kind of pick up on, and so they say in the immediate context of this verse: Oh, now we understand. But, as Dale Bruner, the great commentator says: They are both prematurely confident and prematurely optimistic. They do not really understand yet. So, then Jesus says: I will tell you what is going to happen. You are all going to run away, and it is going to happen tonight.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And He predicts that; there is this Greek word that comes up often. People who know the Greek language know this word. It is a hard word to say in English because it starts out with the letters THL – *thlipsis* – which is often translated, as you said a minute ago, Dave – *tribulation*. Jesus is saying: Look, you are going to have... and there are lots of predictions of this: You are going to be in poverty. You are going to be derided. You are going to be made fun of. You are going to be whipped, you are going to be scourged, you are going to be thrown in jail; and this is, according to Jesus, to be expected. This is not a hiccup. This is not going to be the exception, it is going to be the rule; and that is something we think about in the news of late. We have heard a lot of hardcore persecution. We have had a rise of this group called ISIS, and there have been beheadings of people simply for being Christians – 21 Coptic Christians from Egypt in the winter of 2015 lost their lives just for being Christians – for believing in Christ; and some of us who live in safer contexts – who knows how the world could turn on a dime, and what was safe once, will not be; but if you are living in North America, you wonder about that because we do not generally get thrown in jail or have our lives threatened or the lives of our children threatened [sheerly] for being a Christian; but of course, there are lots of different ways to suffer, and we would not want to downplay those who literally lose their lives by saying: Well, yeah, we have it rough sometimes, too. There are different kinds of ways to be derided and belittled for your faith.

DAVE BAST

Thlipsis is the key word that Jesus uses here in his prediction. This is what you are going to face from the world, in the world, because the world is the enemy of a Christian; that is all there is to it. World in this sense, the sense in which it is so often used in the New Testament, is the enemy of the Gospel of the Church; and so they dish out this kind of treatment and punishment, and as you said, it can refer to a lot of different things. It can refer to death; certainly, that is the ultimate tribulation; so, in Revelation we see the souls of the martyrs under the throne crying out: How long? But, it is also used for things like physical poverty or financial poverty because of your faith. Maybe you could not get a job or you were somehow denied promotion. That happens.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You stood up for the truth and lost your job.

DAVE BAST

Right, yes; or inner distress and anguish. Paul uses it in that sense for what he experiences as he is thinking about the state of the Church; or anxiety or fear even. Even in the New Testament, and throughout Church history, that is probably the most common form that this trouble takes. So, you think of Peter – well, ultimately he was crucified; but when the great test would come the next night, or later that night, on Maundy Thursday, what Peter feared most was the ridicule of a servant girl – you know – that caused him to deny knowing Jesus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that kind of thing has continued on throughout history, even under Communism, where people did not necessarily lose their lives, but they were denied lots of the comforts of life. So, suffering is inevitable, Jesus says. Persecution – *thlipsis* – tribulation in the world – is inevitable. That is not good news; that is not a good thing; but it can lead to good things, according to the Bible, and we will think about that next.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

Hi, I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you're listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are talking about the bad news/good news of Jesus' statement to his disciples, "In the world, you will have trouble (or tribulation or suffering or sorrow); the word he uses could mean any of those things, but be of good cheer – take heart – I have conquered the world."

So, we just said that suffering – Christian suffering, that is – can lead to some good. The question would be, why does God allow this to happen? Why in the world would God stand by when innocent people are done to death, as we saw in such a heinous way, even earlier in 2015, with these terrorist executions and beheadings. I think of another church that we work with in the country of Niger, where suddenly there was a riot and 70 church buildings were burned down; many houses of Christians were targeted and burned simply because people were mad about something the president of the country did. Why does God allow this? While we do not always have easy answers to that, we can say something about the good things that suffering can do for us if we endure it as Christians, because the New Testament also addresses that, Scott.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; we can turn to another text. We looked at a Gospel text in the first segment; now let's go to 1 Peter Chapter 3. Peter is writing to people who are just far enough into the newly formed Church in the First Century that they are getting knocked around; they are getting persecuted; and so Peter, in 1 Peter, his first letter is often comforting them and trying to point them beyond the horizon of the immediate, which is not an easy thing to do for people who are hurting, but here are a couple of things that Peter says:

¹⁴If you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them nor be troubled, ¹⁵but in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy; always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you, and yet, do it with gentleness and respect; ¹⁶having a good conscience, so that when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.

DAVE BAST

So, yes; let's just stop there and take that little bit of what Peter is saying. Notice that he expects this is going to happen; he says it is going to happen; and the kind of suffering that he is talking about is largely psychological. He mentions when you are slandered – when people run you down or mock you or make fun of you; but the interesting thing is, it is a beatitude. Peter says, “You will be blessed when you suffer for righteousness’ sake. Of course, that brings to mind Jesus’ beatitudes because he says the same thing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; blessed are those who suffer from righteousness; blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. And that is, of course, from the Sermon on the Mount.

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, suffering does not mean you are doing something wrong; it means you are doing something right. Somehow, this connects us, Jesus is saying, to the way that it always has gone when God’s truth enters a world of lies; it gets resisted. So, when you are on the side of the truth, you expect this, and somehow are blessed in it, which is so contradictory.

DAVE BAST

Yes; well, and let's just pick up one more thing that Peter says. This is from Chapter 4 now, of 1 Peter: ¹²Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. And then he repeats the fact that you are blessed. So, rejoice in suffering. You are blessed. Wow, that is pretty amazing. I mean, I do not think he means to imply that this is in any way an enjoyable experience, and it certainly is not; but, it is described as blessed or bless-ed.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is not an enjoyable experience, nor is it one you seek out; and Peter will also go on to say nor does it count as suffering if you suffer because you are a jerk.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You have to be gentle and respectful and polite. Do not bring it on yourself.

DAVE BAST

Make sure you have not deserved it; right, exactly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He goes on to say that. If you are just a meddler and a troublemaker and you suffer for it, well, that is not what we are talking about here; but what an interesting thing; and Paul talks about this, too, in different places, including in Galatians. Paul also said that he somehow could see his own sufferings – and Paul certainly got beat up a lot and imprisoned – as somehow connecting him closer to Jesus.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

What an interesting concept that is; that Jesus, the crucified Son of God – a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief and suffering, and Paul says there is something intimate, almost – again, it seems so paradoxical – but there is something intimate about being connected to Jesus that way; to be able to sympathize and empathize with no less than the Son of God. Paul found that heartening, and so did Peter.

DAVE BAST

Paul says at the end of Galatians 1, “I complete what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ,” and Peter here says, “You are participating in the sufferings of Christ,” which is a really dramatic idea, I guess, a really profound idea, that when we suffer in his name and for his sake, he is, in some sense, suffering, not only with us, but we are suffering for him, in him, somehow. It is a mystical idea; but that Christ continues to suffer in one sense, through the sufferings of his people; and these things just draw us more intimately together with him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, the disciple is not greater than the master, right? And so, if no less than the very – and Jesus said this, too, at different times – if no less than the very Son of God came to this world only to get spit on, whipped, and murdered, who do you think you are if you think you are going to get away with it? I mean, if that is how they treated the Son of God, you bear his name now as a Christian – a Christ-in – a little Christ – they are going to treat you the same way, and for the same reason, and that is that a world of lies, a world where the devil still has some influence, is going to resist God’s truth. So, it should not come as any surprise.

DAVE BAST

On that point, Scott, John Henry Newman says, I think in one of his sermons – the great Anglican become Catholic and eventually a Cardinal in the Catholic Church in the 19th Century – says that if you are standing near the cross of Christ, you should not be surprised if some blood gets on you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; yes; exactly. So, suffering, the New Testament tells us again and again, can strengthen our faith because it brings us closer to the Master. We have union with Christ, which is a wonderful thing; and most of the time when you think of being united with Jesus through our baptism it is a positive and a good thing, but baptism is also our participating in the death of Christ; and so when it happens to be the case that union with Christ is not just all positive and glowing, but in fact, it hurts, well, Paul, Peter, Jesus say it is all one package.

DAVE BAST

Well, and I also think of something that a friend of mine who is Iranian, and who experienced physical suffering in Iran for being a Christian; he was put in jail and beaten; and he said, “I hated it, it was horrible. I still have flashbacks. I do not want to go through that again. It was not good, but since I came through that, I know now. I know for sure that I belong to him and Christ is mine, and I am his because I have gone through that.” So, there is that kind of deepening assurance that, wow... I think that is maybe what Paul meant when he says somewhere: Rejoice that you are counted worthy of suffering for Christ.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and maybe the last thing we can talk about in just a moment, Dave, is the thing that Jesus said in the passage we looked at in the first segment, the great line: But I have overcome the world. Christ is victorious, too, and we learn that through suffering. Let’s think about that in just a moment.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we are closing out this program thinking about the paradox of the role suffering plays in our lives, and we do not want to be glib about this because there are Christians around the world who have literally lost loved ones to death by persecution. These are not easy things to talk about, but one of the things that Jesus reminds us – and we thought about in the first part of this program, looking at what Jesus said the night he was betrayed in the Upper Room, “In this world, you will have trouble, but take heart. I have overcome the world,” and what a strong statement that is; and somehow, Jesus spoke that in the past tense before it even happened, which is interesting.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right. I have overcome the world.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, all ready done; and he had not been crucified yet; but that is the confidence he had. As we were reflecting in the previous segment, too, Dave, somehow our own confidence in Jesus’ ultimate victory is confirmed when we participate in the same sufferings that he had, which seems strange, but....

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is the testimony of so many people.

DAVE BAST

And you know, we do not know what is ahead for us. I mean, we – most of us – I think most of the people listening to this program or connecting online are probably English speakers and they are living, maybe, in the West, in North America, primarily, where we are not going to, at least any time soon, from the look of things, be threatened with beheading for being Christians – for following Jesus. And maybe people are wondering, well, what does this have to do with me? Or wouldn’t it be nice if I could have that kind of experience that would so deepen my sense of belonging to him and being authentic in my faith? But frankly, I think we do, probably almost daily, face in little ways the temptation, maybe, to avoid suffering. Maybe it is just embarrassment by kind of downplaying our faith.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, or on the flip side of that, Dave, I am often... So, the New Testament tells us again and again, and we have looked at several of these passages just in this program, do not be surprised when persecution and suffering comes, because it is inevitable. It happened to Jesus, it will happen to Jesus’ followers. Yet, I am often struck, especially in North America and in my own country of the United States, I am often surprised at how surprised people are in the church when they even just get disagreed with in society. Where is the surprise?

DAVE BAST

The other mistake I think we can very easily make is to become belligerent ourselves, and say: We are going to fight them, and show them, and we will get the power on our side and we will pass laws and we are going to make it right. At that point, we need to come back to what Jesus says, “I have overcome the world.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

The victory is won already.

DAVE BAST

But notice how he is going to do it; and here is the great paradox of, really, the whole Gospel and the cross. He will overcome the world by voluntarily submitting to all the mistreatment that the world is going to give

him. Later, in the book of Revelation we are told that we too will conquer. We will share his victory when we are told in Revelation 12 that his saints will overcome through their faithful testimony and through the blood of the Lamb. What that is telling us, I think, is that we too will be victorious, not by the weapons or the means or the attitude of the world, through power, but through voluntarily accepting and enduring suffering for his sake.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And there is in that, and traditionally this has been true throughout Church history, and we have heard it from people, even people who have gone through deep persecution, that there is great repose, there is great peace. Jesus said you will have peace on account of the fact that you do not have to win the victory. You do not have to be brave and clever. You do not have to pass all the right laws to win the day. The day has *already been won* through Jesus, and when we rest in that knowledge, then when people disagree with us or belittle us or roll their eyes over believing that a virgin had a baby once upon a time, or face far worse things, we can relax to know they can make fun of us, they can rough us up, but they cannot take away Jesus' victory because it is done.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and it is our testimony that will win the victory for us; and our testimony is: We do not kill for our faith. We do not lash out and hurt people. We love our enemies. We forgive those who mistreat us. When we are reviled, as Peter says, we do not pay back in the same coin; but by, cheerfully even, accepting what comes to us in the name of Christ, and still loving those even who persecute us, and forgiving them, the victory will come, and that is the Good News of the Gospel.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into the scriptures yourself. So, visit groundworkonline.com and suggest topics and passages you would like us to dig into next on *Groundwork*.

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