

Serving Among the Suffering

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There are many things that a young man who desires to be a pastor does not know. If it is God's will that he be called to office, the young man does not know where the Lord will call him to labor. He does not know the circumstances that God may bring to his ministry or the specific strengths and needs of the congregation he will serve. Amid the uncertainty, however, such a young man can be certain that he will be called to serve amid suffering people. *He* will suffer for God's sake. His *flock* will suffer for God's sake. The Bible tells him so. In Acts 14:22 we read, "[W]e must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God;" 2 Corinthians 1:5 makes the striking statement that "the sufferings of Christ abound in us"; and in John 16:33 Jesus himself assures us that "[i]n the world ye shall have tribulation." While on earth, our Lord suffered. As his children, we share in the fellowship of his sufferings.¹

As we examine concrete examples of the suffering that a pastor and the congregation he serves endure, we will first note the suffering that God's people undergo due to the sins of others. We will then consider the suffering that the children of God experience when they sin. Finally, we will examine suffering that we will broadly categorize as "painful providence": suffering that God is pleased to send that cannot be traced to the actions of ourselves or of others. In every season of suffering, a pastor must be ready to open scripture to the Lord's flock. He must expose the temptations that arise amid suffering, deliver the word that God would have his suffering people hear, and live himself as a godly example of suffering for Christ's sake.

God's people suffer because of the sins of others. This was the experience of Timothy, who suffered reproach for his godliness and trust in the living God (1 Tim. 4:8–10). This truth was borne out in the life David, who cried for deliverance from those who would "tear (his) soul like a lion, rending it in pieces" (Ps. 7:1–2). This suffering was felt by Daniel, whose enemies sought to tear like a lion not

¹ Herman Hoeksema, *Peace for the Troubled Heart* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2010), 73–76.

only his soul but his body as well (Dan. 6:7). Christ himself foretold of men reviling, persecuting, and saying all manner of evil against his people falsely for his sake (Matt. 5:11). No one can number the great crowd of saints in scripture and the history books which have suffered because of the sins of others (Rev. 7:9, 14).

Members of the church today share in the persecutions of the church triumphant. They suffer when they live in a manner that is consistent with their profession and are made the butt of jokes at work. When a young person refuses to join crass joking and wild gatherings, his name may be smeared, and his popularity may wane. He suffers for God's sake. God's people suffer when people take advantage of the fact that Christians will turn their cheeks, give up their cloaks, and go the extra mile (Matt. 5:39–44). When a man leaves the church and abandons his believing wife and children with it, they suffer for God's sake. Believing families suffer long nights crying over the unrepentant sin of a child or sibling. Instead of allowing the sin to go unaddressed, they warn their loved one of impending danger. Their warnings alienate; fellowship is lost. They suffer for God's sake. In some nations God's people are physically attacked, imprisoned, and killed for daring to name the name of Christ.

Besides the empathetic tears a pastor sheds with the people of God in their suffering, he will experience his own suffering for Christ's sake as well. A pastor is not exempt from suffering at the hands of sinners; he works with them every day. Living in his glass parsonage, a pastor can expect to be unfairly criticized from time to time, regardless of how well he performs his duties. The pastor will suffer when he chooses to preach the whole counsel of God in a biblical manner, rather than choosing to play politics in his church. When influential men in the congregation try to cozy up to him, and he refuses to be a respecter of persons, he will suffer. As an undershepherd, a faithful pastor will spend days untangling knots of sin within the flock. He will spend nights praying over sheep who are straying. He suffers because of the sins of others.

Amid these sufferings, there are two dangers against which a pastor must guard himself and his flock. The first danger is that the members of the church blur antithetical lines between themselves and those who would persecute them for their godly walk in an effort to minimize their suffering. The

leisurely path of no resistance is tempting. The ability to conform oneself to this world and to run with them to the same excess of riot (1 Pet. 4:4) is easy in an increasingly connected society. Likewise, a pastor may be tempted to soft-peddle the sharp word of God and to cater to itching ears (2 Tim. 4:1–4). His fear of suffering may tempt him to favor certain segments of the congregation over others (Gal. 2:11–12).

The second danger is for God's people sinfully to call down fire from heaven upon the heads of those who sin against them (Luke 9:54). The devil whispers, “An eye for an eye,” and we are tempted to indulge indignation, to lift up unholy swords, and to start swinging (John 18:10). A pastor's old man of sin can be attracted to this. When he is sinned against, his first reaction can be to begin striking rocks from the pulpit, with the pen, or in private discussions, instead of speaking the words of God (Num. 20:10–11).

A pastor must be on guard against these two ditches. When members of his congregation cry out the words of Psalm 13:2, “[H]ow long shall mine enemy be exalted over me?” the pastor must bring Christ's words of peace to them: “be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). The pastor must give and share in the comfort that God's people are *blessed* by the Lord when they suffer the sins of others for his sake (Matt. 5:11–12). A pastor must preach the truth that the apparent prosperity of the church's persecutors dulls, blinds, and hardens them unto destruction, and that those who curse the people of God are themselves cursed (Gen. 12:3).² The pastor must exhibit the demeanor of Christ, “[w]ho, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously” (1 Pet. 2:23). God's people who suffer because of the sins of others must hear God's clear voice say through the preacher, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord” (Rom. 12:19).

God's people do not only suffer for Christ's sake because of the sins of others. They also suffer because of their own sins. They do not suffer God's *curse* for their sins; Christ has borne away all of the

2 David Engelsma, *Prosperous Wicked and Plagued Saints; An Exposition of Psalm 73* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2007), 84–85.

curse for our sins.³ Nevertheless, the sins of God's people are the occasion for much suffering in their lives. A great internal battle wages in every regenerate heart. We hate evil, and yet our old man loves evil; our new man and old man are in constant, mortal combat. As covenant children of God, it hurts us when we realize that we have lost another battle and have sinned against our Father...again. We exclaim with Paul in frustration and sorrow, “[T]he good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do”! (Rom. 7:19). This sorrow and heartache are worked by the Holy Spirit. This pain is a suffering for Jesus' sake.

A pastor experiences this suffering when he walks into the parsonage on Sunday evening after the service and commits the sin that he had condemned in that night's sermon. He experiences this suffering when he is counseling a young person who is ailing from a particular sin and realizes that he himself is riddled from head to toe with that sin. As one who is called to exhibit particular blamelessness, vigilance, sobriety, and good behavior (1 Tim. 3:2), the pastor's conscience is pricked a little more deeply when he lays his head down at night and thinks about how he has treated his wife and children that day.

God does not will that his people wallow in this suffering. Rather, he uses this particular form of suffering to bring us into a humbled state in which we more fully glorify God and are enabled to enjoy his gracious mercy.⁴ Though a pastor grieves and suffers in his heart over his sins, it would be inappropriate for him constantly to go about with a dour face, lamenting his sinfulness. Rather, he must be the joyful mouthpiece of the voice of God, which proclaims from heaven, “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD'S hand double for all her sins” (Isa. 40:1–2). He must try to reflect the warmth and grace of God, which comes to repentant church members and assures them: “I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely: for mine anger

3 Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 15, Q&A 39 in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 99.

4 John Calvin, *Sermons From Job* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980), 147–150.

is turned away from him” (Hos. 14:4).

In a self-indulgent society that ignores or condones sin, the pastor must be a voice bringing the people of God to the knowledge of how great their sins and miseries are, and then bringing their suffering hearts to the foot of the cross. When the devil comes creeping, whispering, and accusing, the pastor must arrive with the gospel message that no one can lay anything to the charge of God's elect. “It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth?” (Rom. 8:33–34). Again and again, a pastor must cut through the devil's accusations with the reminder to God's people that they must not despair of God's mercy nor continue in sin, since by their baptism they have the seal and undoubted testimony of the eternal covenant of grace with God.”⁵

God's people do not only suffer in connection with the sins of others or themselves. Often God is pleased to send trials and suffering into the lives of his people entirely apart from specific sins that are committed. We are all familiar with such circumstances. Perhaps the Lord sends some type of disappointment into the dating life, the work-life, or the social life of one of his children. Perhaps he frustrates some goal that his child had been working toward for years. God's people suffer when they are forced to watch those whom they love struggle with disease or some special need. God's people suffer when they *themselves* are touched with disease or some special need. In the valley of the shadow of death, God's people suffer. This painful providence is sent for the spiritual advantage of God's people.⁶ God orders it for the perfecting of his saints and the ultimate glorification of his name; we can say then that this suffering is undergone for God's sake.

A pastor can, of course, be touched with the same types of suffering as his flock. However, though all God's people hurt when one member hurts (I Cor. 12:26), a pastor's suffering for God's sake in this way can be unique. The pastor is usually present with God's people during their most difficult times. He calls on troubled spouses and distraught parents; he sits by the bedsides of God's people and

5 Form for the Administration of Baptism, in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 258.

6 Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 9. Ibid, 92–93.

walks with them to their gravesides. In empathy and an undershepherd's love, the many burdens of God's flock weigh on a pastor's mind. He suffers under the painful providence of God.

When painful providence arises in congregations that confess the truth of God's omnipotence and sovereignty, the danger is not so much that we doubt God's *abilities*, but rather that we doubt God's *motives*. In moments of weakness, we may ask amid our suffering, "Is the Lord punishing me?" "Is he setting his face against me?" or even: "Does God *hate* me?" As Reformed people, we confess the total depravity of our old man. The devil twists this to his own ends. He presents the sins of our old man to us and says, "You see? You deserve this. This disappointment, this sickness, this loss, it's all a manifestation of God's temporal judgment upon you; you're not one of his children." Unbelieving and hopeless society chimes in with the devil's lies and advises, "Curse God, eat, drink, and die."⁷

A pastor must recognize these threats to himself and to the congregation he serves. When God's providential hand is heavy upon him, he must, as a good example to his congregation, proclaim with Job, "[T]he LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21) and "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him" (Job 13:15). He must *glory* in tribulations (Rom. 5:3) and pray for the grace to "reckon that the suffering of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18).

God's people suffer because of the sins of others; a pastor must herald the one who "executeth righteousness and judgment for all that are oppressed" (Ps. 103:6). God's people suffer because of their sins; a pastor must bring the good news of the one who "hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities" (Ps. 103:10). God's people suffer because of the Lord's painful providence; a pastor must assure the flock that God pities them "as a father pitieth his children" (Ps. 103:13). It is God's will that we his people hear of his love for us for the sake of the one who "hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows" (Isa. 53:4), who sits in heaven as an high priest who is "touched with the feeling of our infirmities" (Heb. 4:15), and who will someday "wipe away all tears"

7 John Calvin, *Sermons From Job* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980), 94–98.

from the eyes of his suffering people (Rev. 21:4).

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