

# The Perseverance of Love

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<i>Text</i>	1 Corinthians 13:7
<i>Readings</i>	1 Peter 2:18-25, 1 Corinthians 13:1-7

How can a God of love allow so much pain and suffering in this world? It is a question that is often asked of Christians by non-Christians. If God has the power to do something about this problem but chooses not to, then he is not a God of love - if he desires to do something but cannot, then he is not all-powerful. And it is reasoning like this that has led many people to deny the existence of God.

Well, brothers and sisters, it is not our purpose this morning to look into the problem of suffering from a philosophical or abstract point of view. But we do want to look at it from a practical point of view because it surfaces in Paul's treatment of the subject of love. In verse 7 of 1 Corinthians 13 we read that love bears all things, and at the end of the verse - a similar expression - love endures all things. We do need to pause and explain the differences in translation here because the NASB has love "bearing all things" and the NIV has love "always protecting" and those ideas are somewhat different, as I'm sure you'll agree. The reason for the difference is that the Greek word used here by Paul has more than one meaning. In the older, classical usage of the term, the word means to keep out or fend off - like a raincoat keeping out water or a windbreaker keeping out the cold wind. If it is used in connection with warfare, the word means to fend off blows or weapons - like the function of a shield or the left hand guard in boxing. So this is the sense that the NIV draws on when it translates "love always protects". And it does. It is an expression of love for an older brother to stand up for a younger brother and fend off the blows of the bully. It is loving for a mother to take off her coat and give it to her child who is shivering in the cold. But there is a later sense of the Greek word that is commonly used in the New Testament and it means to bear up and endure against hardship. This is the sense that Paul used it in a few chapters earlier, as I can show you if you turn to 1 Corinthians 9:12 [read]. Here we have exactly the same expression, and the sense is obvious. Paul did not use his right to material support from the Corinthians and he endured or put up with the hardship that this brought to him because he did not want to hinder the gospel of Christ in any way.

And there is no reason to think that Paul has changed the meaning of the expression 4 chapters later when he says this is what love is like. Love puts up with things that cause hardship. More generally, even when there is no immediate cause or goal in the suffering, love remains firm. It endures or "remains under" all things, however trying they may be, rather than fleeing from pain and hardship.

This is the teaching that I want to focus on in detail this morning. I've called it the *perseverance of love*. There is a saying that when the going gets tough, the tough get going and there is a certain amount of truth in that, but for our purposes this morning, we can change that expression to read: when the going gets tough, those who are loving persevere through that hardship.

Now let's plunge in and explore this theme in more detail. Why is this a Christian attitude to pain and suffering in all its forms? Why is it that here we learn one of the vital aspects of love? Well, for answer, I want

us to turn to the passage we read from 1 Peter 2. It's an amazing passage in many respects, but let's look at it in terms of those questions. The first response we can make is **that our example and motivation is Christ himself**. Peter is speaking in this passage about a particular type of suffering. Servants suffering at the hands of unjust masters. Harsh treatment, unfair treatment by authority figures and we can read into there by analogy - harsh treatment of children by domineering and abusive parents - harsh, unfair treatment of employees by the boss (and remember, there were no unions in those days), or harsh, unfair, insensitive treatment of congregation members by church leaders. And in each case the operative factor is a sense of helplessness in the face of people who can pretty much do what they like and get away with these forms of abuse.

Now, what do we do? Well, there are those who would say: You just have to grin and bear it, mate. Them's the breaks. Life is tough and you better learn to live with it. Like going to the dentist - it's a necessary evil. You just have to put up with the pain. Well, I don't know about you, but to me that is no consolation at all. I suppose that is because I don't like suffering and I certainly don't like suffering unfair treatment at the hands of others. And when I go the dentist, I don't mind admitting that I'm a bit of a wimp and I take the injection. Pain is not my cup of tea at the best of times. I'm into avoiding it when I can.

Ah, but you see, Peter's encouragement runs along other railway track. He does not tell his readers that they just have to grin and bear it. He encourages them to think of another person who also suffered unjust, unfair treatment at the hands of others. We all know that this happened in the life of Jesus Christ - he was delivered into the hands of sinful men and they mocked him and beat him in a travesty of a trial. And all the while, says Peter, Jesus uttered no threats and no reviling in return. He quite specifically did not give back as much as he got. And why did Jesus do this? It was not because he had some sort of masochistic love of pain for its own sake. When those nails were driven into his hands, he had us on his heart. Jesus endured this suffering out of love and as an expression of his love for us because he was taking the penalty of our sins upon himself. And that made the suffering worthwhile for the Saviour. I'll say that again, Jesus suffered for us because he loves us.

But hang on, says Peter, Jesus left us an example that we should walk in his footsteps. An example of love and when we walk in his footsteps and suffer for him, then we are showing our love for him just as he showed his love for us, though to a far lesser degree, of course. You see what it is: It is not an "ah, well, them's the breaks, grin and bear it and be tough" kind of attitude. It is look: Are you suffering? Well, Jesus suffered for you as an expression of his love. Are you prepared to love him and endure just this little bit of hardship for him? Isn't our Saviour worth that little bit of endurance in this life? We don't have to love pain. But we do have to love Jesus and that means that we will endure pain patiently for him.

That leads me to the second point I want to make: **Our calling is to suffer with patience**. You may think we've covered this already, but not quite. In verse 21 Peter says to his readers: You have been called for this purpose. In other words, this is your reason for existence as Christians. We are not speaking of a one off event of suffering here and there amidst a life of great joy. We are speaking of hardship as a manner of life, a path down which we are called to walk; we are speaking of something much more ordinary - as if the Christian life consists in a whole host of trips to the dentist with no anaesthetic - one struggle after another.

I stress this point because it is so radical. There are those who present the gospel as if God is some sort of cosmic cure-all for all life's woes. Believe on Jesus and you will be healed of your sickness and your mortgage will be paid off. Give yourself to Jesus and all your worries and trials will be over. Well, that may be true in heaven, but it is not true in this life. One of my colleagues told me recently that he had long since given up the idea that Christians will never experience hardship because they are Christians. If we are Christians, things are supposed to go right for us in life, right? We are supposed to be happy with no trials or woes and if things are not going right, then it must be that God is punishing us for something. We must have done something wrong - else we would not be in this mess. But brothers and sisters, this is nonsense. The book of Job is in the Scriptures to teach us that not all suffering is the result of our sin. And Peter tells us that we have a calling in life to walk in the footsteps of Jesus in this very area.

Brothers and sisters, if you are in pain and suffering for some reason - and you are suffering all the more because you know that although you are certainly not perfect, you have tried hard and you are sincere enough in your efforts as a Christian, but somehow, no matter what you try, you are still struggling, let me encourage you with this thought. There are many, many Christians who struggle with all sorts of burdens. There are people who live a godly life but are called to endure the deepest pain and suffering - for no apparent reason. And we needn't make the mistake of saying with Job's friends that the reason for the pain is secret sins unconfessed. That's rubbish. But what we can say, as a general principle, is this: When Christians are called to suffer for no reason of their own doing, they have an opportunity to deepen and grow in their love for God and for the Saviour. And this is why some of the most sincere, godly people who are closest to their Lord, are also people who have endured in their lifetime, some of the greatest of pains. If you are a person who struggles, it is not because God does not love you. It is because the Christian life calls us to walk in the footsteps of Christ and in our suffering with patient endurance - we have an opportunity to grow in our love for God. This is why Paul says that love bears and endures all things.

There is one other point that I want to make by way of encouragement and it concerns **our reward for perseverance in suffering**. At this point, you may think that I'm going to speak of wonderful, glorious rewards in heaven. Well, sorry to disappoint you. There may well be wonderful, glorious rewards in heaven for those who serve God in suffering but this is not the teaching of our text. Our text gives us an incentive that is at the same time more simple than that and yet much more profound as well.

In verse 19 we read, literally, "for this is grace" when for the sake of conscience toward God, a man bears up under sorrows. The point is repeated in verse 20 at the end - "this is grace before or in the presence of God". So the reward we are speaking of is the appreciation of God. It is the simple declaration of the Lord to us: Well done! What you have shown in your perseverance in hardship is what I call "grace". Other people might call it plain stupidity - going to the dentist and declining the anaesthetic. But God knows we have hung in there for him because we love him and his response is to acknowledge our perseverance as grace in his sight. He finds it valuable. Think about this - that we can do something that God actually finds valuable - and we are not speaking of buildings built or numbers of people converted as a result of mission work. We are speaking of something that is often intensely private - just between you and God - your suffering and yet your perseverance through that suffering. No-one really knows. No-one shares what you have gone through. Only you and God. What is that worth of that on a scale of value? Hanging in there only because we love God? Well, God says that to him, it is a grace that he takes as a personal gift from you to him.

What did Jesus do in the midst of suffering? He entrusted himself to God who judges righteously, a God who in the last verse of our text, verse 25, is described as the Shepherd and Guardian of our souls.

Brothers and sisters, isn't it worth it? I cannot suffer and endure for you, and you cannot suffer and endure for me. We each of us have our own burdens to bear. We can speak of them to others perhaps, and that's a help, but in the end we have to go back to our own patient endurance. And that's sometimes a very, very lonely vigil. But isn't it worth it when we remember that Jesus loved us enough to suffer for us and that he has given us an example and a calling. Isn't it worth it when we realise that he takes our suffering for his sake as a personal thing - an expression of love and grace to him?

Love, says Paul, bears and endures all things. May God grant that we would be men and women and boys and girls who practise love.

Amen