

REJOICING IN SUFFERING

By Lay Pastor Budy Avianto
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Shalom,

Is it true that we would still be able to rejoice in the midst of suffering? How did Paul tell us about his suffering with Christ? In Philippians 1:12-14, he wrote, *“But I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto **the furtherance of the gospel**; So that **my bonds in Christ** are manifest in all the palace and in all other places; And many of the brethren in the Lord, waxing confident by my bonds, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.”*

How marvelous it is to discover that Paul’s suffering was a fuel for the Evangelism. How come? Because he wasn’t jailed for law trespassing, but because of Christ (Acts 28:17-18). As the children of God, we shall not trespass any law made by the government or the society. As we know, Indonesia consists of many tribes with their own language and local wisdom. Live accordingly to the law of God and man that people may see the difference in our life for God abides in us.

Paul was in his second voyage to evangelize in Asia, but was withheld by the Holy Spirit (Acts 16:6). In his vision, he saw a Macedonian called him out, *“Come over to Macedonia and help us.”* (V. 9)

Led by the Holy Spirit, he went to Macedonia (a European region) to preach the gospel to the inhabitants. The first visited city was Philippi (v.12). He found a synagogue while he was going along the river, and talked to the women who gathered there. One of them named Lydia, a seller of purple, listened to what Paul said and God opened her heart. What happened next? Lydia and her household were baptized. They were saved for their faith in the Lord (v.15).

Then Paul met a damsel possessed with a spirit of divination. She was used by her master for profit (v.16). Paul was disturbed and cast away the spirit from that woman. Her master became furious for they had lost their source of profit. They arrested Paul and Silas, dragged them to the market and brought them to the ruler (v.18-19). Paul and Silas were then jailed and their feet were bound. (v.24). In such agony, they never asked the Lord to set them free. Rather, they prayed and worshiped God as witnessed by other inmates (v.25). Suddenly, there was a massive earthquake that opened all the doors and everyone’s bands were loosed. The head of the prison was terrified and

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about to commit a suicide when he thought that all prisoners had escaped. But Paul held him off. He then asked Paul what he had to do to be saved. Paul assuredly told him to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ in order to be saved, he and his household. At that very hour he and his household believed and were baptized. He was rejoicing because he and his household believed in God (verse 34). Their repentance was a flashback of Paul's previous life as Saul. He was an intellectual person, a student of Gamaliel. But with his great capability, he became a ferocious murderer. He tortured the followers of Christ. In his journey to Damascus, he saw a bright light and heard the voice of the Lord whom he persecuted (Acts 22:3-9). He repented at the very moment. As a murderer, he didn't deserve any inheritance in the Kingdom of Heaven. But his repentance brought him grace, not condemnation (1 Timothy 1:14). He was baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit, and his life was changed totally, led by the Holy Spirit.

It was obvious that it was the Holy Spirit who led him to Macedonia instead of Asia. Though he was flogged and imprisoned, his heart was filled with joy.

Application: Whatever our problem is, it should not be our reason to blame the Lord and not to come to church. Rather, pray and praise Him for all the suffering we endure for everything is under His control. And He enthroned on our praises (Psalm 22:4).

We were dead once because of our transgressions because we were under the prince of the power of the air and live according to the flesh (Ephesians 2:1-5). But we were then saved by grace (v.5). Now, after we have been saved, should we live according to our old way of life? Surely not! Paul gave us an example by his total transformation when he walked under the guidance of Holy Spirit. As a 'captive of the Holy Spirit', he preached the gospel from town to town as the Holy Spirit revealed him to do so. Even though he knew that jail and agonies were awaited him, he didn't even spare his own life (Acts 20:21-24).

Application: We are the captives of the Holy Spirit, means that we are no longer free to live under our own will. Follow His guidance though it might bring us through suffering, keep rejoicing and giving thanks all the time as Paul did when he was in jail (Philippians 1:3-4). He didn't ask to be freed though it was an unfair case. Jesus Himself said that whoever is willing to follow Him must take up the cross and deny himself (Matthew 16:2).

Prison means suffering. The big question is what is the believers' foundation of joy? Is it the provision of basic needs (food, clothes, etc)? Worldly blessings are only temporary and limited. Our age is also limited to only 70-80 years to enjoy everything in this world

(Psalm 90:10). When the 70 disciples were rejoicing after they had successfully cast out demons in Jesus' name, Jesus told him not to take joy because evil spirit was submissive to them, rather because their names were listed in the Kingdom of Heaven (Luke 10:17-20). God offers unlimited joy in the new earth where there will be no tears and lamentation (Revelation 21:1,4)

Introspection: what is the basic cause of our suffering? Is it our own mistakes, just like what Paul did before he repented? Yes, they can bring to condemnation. We need to remember that God gives us the ability to win. If we made mistakes, ask Him for forgiveness, repent and don't make the same mistakes. We surely can't meet Him face to face, but we can find Him when we read and listen to the Word of God. The Word of God is God Himself. An overly flattering preacher, no matter how good he is, could be dangerous for there are many of them who are not the servant of righteousness (2 Corinthians 11:15). Rather, return to the Truth of the Word. Take the Bereans as a good example. They observed the Scriptures on daily basis to check whether what they had heard was consistent with the scripture (Acts 17:11). When the Word of God is being preached, the truth will set us free from sin (John 8:32). Avoid pseudo-joy, meaning at first we ministered to Him based on the Word of God, but then we prioritized more on the success of our ministry rather than the Word of God itself which result in leaving out the Bible. A servant of God is given the power by Him to become an instrument for His glory.

If we have been reconciled with God and others but suffering is still around, don't lose heart! God will give us strength through the light of the Word within our heart that we may cope with persecution, hardships, etc. for we always bring the death of Christ that His life might also be revealed in our body (2 Corinthians 4:1-11). In other words, although we are dead because of the suffering, we still have hope for we will eventually be raised with Him. We need to admit that our physical condition is decreasing by time, but our inner person shall be renewed day by day because our light affliction is only for a moment, and works for us a far more eternal glory that can't be seen now (v.16-18). If the tent of our body returns to dust, God has prepared us a place in heaven that is not a man made (Acts 5:1).

Do we want happiness? Here is the tip from Jesus himself: **Blessed are they, which are persecuted for righteousness sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.**' (Matthew 5:10-12)

So whatever our condition is, don't lose hope or heavy-hearted! Keep praying and praising the Lord! And the most important thing is make sure that we have the light of the Word that will renew us day by day. Therefore, we shall seek for the kingdom of God and everything shall be added afterward (Matthew 6:33). It is easy for God to give us physical blessings if we put the eternal things first.

God is truly comforting us through His Word, but what about our family and the people at our school or office? Do they stay rejoicing when they are afflicted because of truth? We can take a glass of water as an example. An empty glass when poured with water will overflow. So will with our heart, when we are filled with joy, we won't be able to hold it. There will be an urge inside us to spread it out through our praises and actions. If only Paul rejoiced for himself, what good is it? No one can hold him back though he was jailed; he was still productive by writing the epistles to the Philippians, Ephesians and others. Those epistles were eventually canonized in the Bible, and it had even been distributed to Indonesia in the 6th or 7th century. Now we can have the same joy as we hear and read those epistles.

How did Paul face his death sentence? He wrote in Philippians 1:21-26 ***"For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labor: yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you. And having this confidence, I know that I shall abide and continue with you all for your furtherance and joy of faith: That your rejoicing may be more abundant in Jesus Christ for me by my coming to you again."***

Paul feared of nothing about his death for he knew that his name was listed in heaven. He even willingly lived in suffering, working to bear fruit, and he did it joyfully. What about us? After we have been saved, do we selfishly rejoice and enjoy our salvation for ourselves? If the prophets and apostles had been selfish, the gospel wouldn't have reached Indonesia. The Lord requires us to continue the evangelism, so that many people might be rejoicing in the middle of their affliction because of the truth.

Remember that His love is not limited only to this congregation, but it is His desire that no one shall perish but everyone is to return and repent (2 Peter 3:9). Hold on in the middle of your suffering because of truth as God will give us the power of victory that one day our hope will be manifested, that is to live together forever with Him in His eternal Kingdom. Amen.

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