

Sufficient Grace: *Suffering is Hope*

“O Love That Will Not Let Me Go”
George Matheson, 1842-1906

*O Love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.*

George Matheson wrote the hymn, “O Love That Will Not Let Me Go,” at the age of 40, on the night of his sister’s wedding. George was flooded with the painful memory of the woman he loved who did not marry him because he was losing his sight. Through deep and personal suffering, George came to know and trust in the love of God made known in Jesus Christ.

In the Scriptures, Paul, the chief of sinners, gives us God’s answer to his plea for God to remove a thorn in his flesh. “My grace is sufficient for you for power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12: 7-10). Paul makes it known that this thorn is given to him. In ancient literature, a piercing of the flesh by a thorn or an arrow signified love’s invasion of the body; it was a common theme in love poetry. The love of God is found in suffering.

*O light that followest all my way,
I yield my flickering torch to thee;
My heart restores its borrowed ray,
That in thy sunshine’s blaze its day
May brighter, fairer be.*

God does not seem to be a particularly sentimental God. The heart of God and God's willingness to share in the sufferings of the world God loves come to articulation in the event of the cross. To bear a cross is to bear the suffering that brings the crown of glory. The love of God does not find but creates that which is pleasing to it, and God creates from the nothing to which he reduces us in suffering (Martin Luther). In suffering, God rids us of the unbelieving old Adam so that the new life may begin. Jesus tells Nicodemus that unless a man is born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God (John 3:3).

Contrary to what we might want to believe, we are addicted to sin, and the cross is the intervention; it is the "bottoming out." We are never more in touch with our apostasy than at the cross. The false optimism of positive thinking will do us no good when it comes to sin. But, it is also in the cross that faith recognizes that God is gracious. In our deepest sorrows and our deepest wounds, we can be assured that God has shared in our suffering in the life and crucifixion of Christ. Jesus was crucified at the hands of the human race, but he makes it known that he laid his life down on his own accord; it was not taken from him. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). God's grace is sufficient for you. God will have his way. This is good news because life is held in the hands of a Creator who creates from nothing:

"Other virtues may be perfected by doing, but faith, hope and love, only by suffering, by being passive under the divine operation. The soul is taken hold of [by the pure word of God]; it is stripped of its own garments, of its shoes, of all its possessions, and is taken away by the word into the wilderness, to invisible

things, into the vineyard, and into the marriage chamber. But this leading, this taking away, and this stripping, miserably tortures [the soul]. For it is a hard path to walk in, and a straight and narrow way, to leave all valuable things, to be stripped of all natural senses and ideas, and to be led out of all those things which we have been accustomed; this indeed, is to die, and to descend into hell.”¹

According to Martin Luther, this is the proper disposition of the sinner to the grace of God, and it is important to note that this suffering is not the theology of something we must do (theology of glory), rather it is the theology of something that is done to us (theology of the cross). This dying brought on through suffering causes us to finally know and speak the truth about God, exposing the idols we have created of Him. His saving work seems strange, but we must first die so that we may live. It is in our suffering that we cry out (like Job) to God as the ultimate answer to it all.²

*O Joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
And feel the promise is not vain,
That morn shall tearless be.*

Summarizing an interesting exchange between Jesus and the disciples, specifically Peter, in Mark 8:29-38: When He asks them who people say that He is they respond with John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets...”, but when He asks them, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter answers, “ You are the Messiah.” After sternly ordering them not to tell anyone about Him, Jesus openly foretells His death and

¹ Gerhard Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 87.

² Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 88-9.

resurrection. Peter pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him. Jesus, in turn, rebukes Peter with the words, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things.” He called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me.” We will lose our lives on account of our salvation; we will die so we can live. We follow after Christ in the way of the cross, and it is here we come to know the God that we are looking for in our terms of human glory. In the way of the cross, we worship God as God intends us to worship God. By this passive experience of suffering, we come to know Christ as the Messiah, and we come to know that God is the ultimate answer to it all.

*O Cross that liftest up my head,
I dare not ask to fly from thee;
I lay in dust life's glory dead,
And from the ground there blossoms red
Life that shall endless be.*

We would never construct a God such as Jesus Christ or a God who takes your shoes. We would never construct a religion patterned after the cross. As we experience our own sinfulness before the holy God who declares, “I am the Lord your God,” we may want to run away from God. But, in this declaration, God promises to be our God! God will not leave us nor let sin and death have the final say over our lives. Christ mirrors God's. As we come to know Jesus, we come to know God, disguised in human flesh and humility. God calls us in grace to experience God where he bled and died on the cross. God calls us to know the passion of the God who saves sinners.