



When you become consumed by God's call on your life, everything will take on new meaning and significance. You will begin to see every facet of your life – including your pain – as a means through which God can work to bring others to Himself.” ~ Charles Stanley

April 28th The Shofar Acts 8:26-40

From the seed of martyrs, the Church grows

The great Church Father **Tertullian** (160 AD-240) knew full well that what the Romans wanted to see from the Christian persecution was not happening. Rome wanted the Christians to be “good citizens” and offer tribute to the false gods. By following their own contorted logic, they figured making an example of Christians by executing them would dissuade others from becoming Christian. But as Tertullian pointed out, their number only increased. The witness of the martyrs made people wonder **why** the Christians would put their lives on the line. Why would they do that? And all this pain for not offering a pinch of salt to Zeus! Really? We can truly say that the blood of those that died for Christ gave birth to even more Christians. For every person the Romans killed, at least two would be converted. This is why Christianity was able to rise so steadily during the first four centuries A.D. They offered people the cross and hope came with it.

The origins of the Church as we read in Acts opens for us significant challenges. If blood was the seed from which Christians grew into knowing, loving and serving Jesus, we can probably extrapolate that argument into seeing how the softness of today's Western Christians, our unwillingness to sit beneath the cross is dulling our faith, strangling our hope and turning people from blessings of believing.

Beginning as a despised, illicit religious sect, Christianity endured 300 years of this hostility to emerge as the dominant force in the Roman Empire. Suffering was inevitable for any person wanting to follow Jesus. But what were we thinking when we took on the baptismal life in Christ.

We are to persevere through suffering

1 Peter writes *if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.* (4:16). *Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God.* (**1 Peter 4:1**) If the Church follows a suffering Saviour, we should prepare ourselves to suffer with

him. If Christ learned obedience through what he suffered (**Hebrews 5:8**), then how much more do we, as his people, need to learn obedience through suffering? But why is it that hardship, difficulties and uncertainties all prove to be too much for many Western Christians?

We have HOPE the suffering world does not know

And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen and establish you. (**5:10**) Christ's suffering had an eternal purpose, and so every moment of our suffering has a purpose and is preparing us for our promised eternity with Christ (**Romans 8:28**). We have this hope and joy in even the most disastrous of circumstances. The way we persevere in suffering, following in Jesus' footsteps will be our message of hope to the world.

Reflecting Our Savior's Comfort

For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ. (**2 Corinthians 1:5**). This is one aspect of our faith that should not only make us stand out in the broader community, but it is also the most powerful way of helping others to find hope in their own suffering. It is when we are most burdened that God lifts us up and consoles us with His Holy Spirit, and the key to that is humility.

Suffering hope also proves our faith genuine

This is a powerful insight from Paul: *we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.* (**Romans 5:3-5**)

When suffering and troubles come our way, it can either drive us away or bring us closer to Christ. We need God in those times, or we will struggle on our own, pursuing human solutions. As believers, rather than seeking to avoid those

hardships at any cost, suffering is to be embraced because it strengthens our Hope and teaches us endurance. As we are strengthened by Holy Spirit, we endure. As we endure, the Spirit conforms us more and more to the character of Christ. And as we grow in the person of Christ, we experience a deepening of hope. As Hope grows within us, we find that our **faith** is being validated and the Christ within leads us to greater and greater levels of courage and perseverance.

When life hurts too much, Christ is our comfort

The truth is, it's easy to follow Christ when everything's going according to our plans and life is comfortable. Easy when church keeps us happy and content and does not demand too much. It is only when we pass through the furnace of pain and hurt that our faith is proven genuine, and as we see the evidence of Christ at work within us, we grow in hope, a hope that lights our way even when we struggle to know where to turn and what to do. Hope does not mean we know all of the answers, just that there are answers, and they rest in God's hands.

As Christians we should never fear pain or suffering. Without faith those burdens can seem to be senseless, and we end up wondering "**Why Lord**"? But the way of discipleship is to turn to Jesus and allow him to be with us in our pain, to walk alongside of us as we struggle and to comfort us as we deal with the consequences of our own sins and the sins of others. We should never forget that it is in our persevering in faithfulness, in our own taking up of the cross of salvation, that God brings great things out of our struggles.

Reflecting our Savior's Gospel

Paul puts it so eloquently: *We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.* (2 **Corinthians 4:7-10**)

We live in a world that tirelessly pursues comfort, success, and happiness. If we, as believers, prioritises the same goals, why would anyone take notice of the treasure we have in Christ? But when we are broken, yet hope-filled, the treasure that is Christ shines through our brokenness for others to

see, for the world to know what a difference Jesus makes.

When the Church, universal or local endures all things for the sake of the Gospel, suffers and chooses not to strike back, then the Gospel is victorious. God can work with the broken more than he can with those who are content and seek always the easy road, the road of compromise and self-interest. Only in humbling ourselves and dying in Christ can we illuminate what a treasure the True Gospel is. But when the world sees little more than indignation, cynicism, resentment and anger coming out of our rejection and disillusionment they turn away from us, for they can find the same things in other institutions and groups. The gospel is a unique gift.

First, Christ tells us what God wants from us. In a word, God wants fruit! Fruit is mentioned six times in our text and a total of eight times in this chapter. In the eighth verse Jesus says, *My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.*

Yes, God expects us to bear fruit. But what kind of fruit are we called to bear? We are called to bear the fruit of Christian character, Christian conduct, and Christian converts! God wants us to bear the fruit of Christian character. **Galatians 5:22-23** describes the fruit produced in us by the Spirit Christ gives us. It is the fruit of Christian character.

Galatians 5:22-23 says, the fruit of the Spirit is *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*. These are the qualities of Christian or Christlike character. **Colossians 1:10-11** says we are supposed to *...lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him as (we) bear fruit in every good work*. Christian character produces Christian conduct. If we have the Spirit of Christ living in us, He will produce Christlike conduct through us. It is Christ who bears fruit through us.

God grafts us; He grafts us into the vine. This is because no one is connected to Christ by birth or by nature. We are wild shoots destined for the burning. It is through grace we are grafted into the vine of Christ and Christ's gift of the Holy Spirit makes us into fruit bearers. But why would He do that? Because the world needs to be fed with the graces of God. Is crying out for heavenly food, for the sustenance that comes from immersing ourselves into Christ. We are God's gift to the world, called to feed them with the only food that will sustain them and lead them to life eternal.