

Suffering and Glory

Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?

Reflection 21 in the series “The Last Great New Command”

On the day that Jesus was resurrectedⁱ two of Jesus’ disciples were walking out to the village of Emmaus, some seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking about everything that had happened – Jesus’ death, the strange darkness over the whole land at midday, the city filled with rumors afterwards. As they walked along talking, a man – it was Jesus himself – joined them, but they did not recognize him. And he asked them what they were discussing. They stopped, and Cleopas who was one of the two asked, “Are you just visiting? Don’t you know the things that have happened in Jerusalem these past few days?”

Jesus asked, “What things?”

“About Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied, “He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. But our nation’s religious leaders had him crucified. We had hoped he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And amazing things have happened. Some of our women going to his tomb this morning found his body gone and had visions of angels. And when others went to the tomb, they found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.”

At this point Jesus said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. Then as they approached the village and evening fell, they invited Jesus to eat with them, and in the breaking of the bread together their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight.

There are of course many remarkable truths in this story, and I would suppose that one the first reading audience might have seen most quickly was this – that although these two men did not know it was Jesus, although it did not occur to them that it could be, it was. It was him, and he had been there all along. They thought they were alone in their misery, just talking to themselves, mourning the death of a friend. But Jesus came and walked with them. They thought they were joined by a casual stranger, one who at first really seemed out of it, but the one with them was Jesus. When they least expected it, when they could not imagine it, Jesus was with them, as he had always said he would be.

But what I want us to now see is something else in the text, these words: “Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” There are of course many lessons from that astonishing weekend 2,000 years ago: that Jesus by his death absorbed the anger of the world, became our ransom, became himself the final “sacrifice for sin,” became the last scapegoat. There would be no scapegoats in his kingdom. Even Roman centurions, officers in the army of occupation, were welcome. There would be no

scapegoats. Except for him. He would take on “the sins of the world.” And all those things are really important, and important in these days in which we live.

But now let’s look at something more basic, simpler, maybe more directly applicable to many of us today. “Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” Did Christ not have to undergo the shameful arrest, the sleepless night, the interrogations, the mockery, the brutal scourging, the nails driven in, the hours of thirst and taunting suspended on the cross struggling for breath, and then the glory?

And that is always true: first, the suffering, and then the glory, and without the suffering, there is no glory. Did not the Christ have to suffer and then enter into his glory? And isn’t that always the pattern for our lives as well? It’s something every aspiring athlete knows, everyone who’s ever tried to do something that is hard, all great social reformers, all entrepreneurs, anyone who’s ever achieved anything worthwhile knows: first the suffering, and then the glory.

Some of us are suffering. You might just feel all alone, but you’re not. Many of us are suffering in one way or another: trouble at home, trouble at work, feelings disregarded and ignored, struggling with addiction, struggling with sin, struggling with disease, scared, frightened about the future, maybe even feeling betrayed. Look again at Jesus, who is our way, our model, our truth, our life. It’s first the suffering and then the glory.

Look back at your life, at its most painful events.ⁱⁱ To how many of them are you indebted today, because thanks to them you changed and you grew? You became a larger, wiser, kinder person. Here is life’s simple truth that most people never discover: Happy events are fun, they give us pleasure, but they do not lead to self-discovery or growth or freedom. The events that lead to self-discovery and growth and freedom are the things and persons and situations that cause us pain. And we are as good and as wise as our suffering has made us. When we see this, it becomes a whole lot easier to be loving, less angry, less fearful, less resentful, more loving and accepting.

Every painful event contains within itself potential for growth and freedom. And it is from the events that have hurt us most and the people who have hurt us most that we have learned the most about ourselves and about life. They have shattered our illusions and false expectations, and exposed our inner programming which wasn’t working anyway. Stop. Look. See. See how so often the pain in your life comes from some expectation that you for one were meant to have a perfect family, a perfect wife (or husband), perfect children, a perfect job, a perfect home, a dream lifestyle, no disease, no heartbreak, no suffering. And now knowing this – knowing that first comes suffering, then the glory – you are free, finally free, to live and to enjoy the moments of your life and all the gifts you are already surrounded with. But the wisdom comes from the suffering. Happy events are fun, but they do not make us grow.

Let’s take this one step further. Look at the things you do not like in yourself: your anxiety or greed or fearfulness, your defects, your secret struggles, your handicaps, your errors, your attachments and neuroses, your hang-ups and even your sins. Inside each one

of them is the potential for self-discovery and growth and freedom, for possibilities that would never otherwise be in your life except for this thing you dislike about yourself. Stop. Look. See. See that it's all part of a sacred tapestry, played out at its most iconic, its most archetypal, by the dying and rising of Jesus, a sacred pattern, first the suffering and then the glory, and that we're all as good and as wise and as glorious as our suffering has made us.

If you can see this, and some of you might be able to and some of you might not (at least not right now) your heart will be flooded with peace and gratitude and love and acceptance of the whole tapestry, the happy moments and the painful, the people we find immediate pleasure in and the people that bring us pain. You walk through the pain, through the suffering, and after that, only after that, comes the glory. That's the hidden message of Christ's dying and rising, and the deep truth at the heart of the universe. And with that you will find yourself just a bit further down the road to living a life of love.

– Dale Pauls

ⁱ As recorded in Luke 24:13-27

ⁱⁱ Indebted to Anthony DeMello, *The Way to Love*, 157 ff.