

Week 2, The Intimacy of Shared Suffering: *“Love on the Cross”*

Suffering. That word likely invokes all kinds of emotions and images. Most of them highly undesirable! So why on earth would a topic like suffering be included in a study on intimacy with God?

When we think about the people we are closest to in our lives, we often have the deepest bond with those with whom we’ve walked through difficult times. Relationships that don’t transparently share their suffering and heartache are rarely as deep as those that do. Considering this, it isn’t difficult to understand why there is a depth of intimacy in shared suffering that can’t be fully developed any other way. As we journey through life on a fallen planet, we *all* suffer at some point (see John 16:33). The question is, will you allow the suffering of this current age to deepen your relationship with the Lord, or drive you from Him?

Before we explore this concept further, I feel it is important to say a few things about what this week’s topic *isn’t* about:

1. It isn’t about willingly subjecting ourselves to a myriad of self-imposed sacrifices and needless suffering to somehow prove our piety to God.
2. It isn’t about God “allowing”—or even worse *sending*—a bunch of horrible things into our lives to somehow teach us “deep” lessons we couldn’t learn any other way.
3. Finally, it isn’t about rationalizing sin and failure by justifying and re-branding the consequences of our own foolishness and labeling it as “suffering for the sake of Christ.”

Instead, what I do hope to stir within you this week are these two concepts:

1. That Jesus identifies with *our* suffering, and wants us to *willingly* share our heartache with Him to a degree that is often far beyond our comprehension.
2. That to truly *know Him* ultimately means sharing with Him in His own suffering.

Let’s dive in!

~Study~

Read Philippians 3:1-16

I love the book of Philippians in general because it is a “real-world” kind of book. It’s clear from his writings, that Paul had a brilliant mind and understood deep theological concepts

in a way few ever have. Aren't we all glad the Holy Spirit saw fit to allow us to glean from Paul's insights through the pages of Scripture! But I've always seen Philippians as unique among Paul's writing. It is generally understood that Paul wrote Philippians while confined to a Roman prison. That fact makes the overall theme of the book, which could be described as "joy in the midst of suffering," all the more remarkable—and all the more vital for us to understand.

While I love the entire book, it is Philippians 3:1-16 that the Holy Spirit has drawn me to repeatedly. These verses reveal truths that establish a foundation of unshakeable joy and unbroken communion with Him—even while living in the midst of a fallen, broken world.

From the exhortation in the first verse to rejoice:

Whatever happens, my dear brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. I never get tired of telling you these things, and I do it to safeguard your faith (Phil. 3:1 NLT).

To the challenge to press on to lay hold of *everything* it cost Jesus so much to purchase (verses 12-14), there is a deep compelling within the words to abandon all for the sake of the One who is all in all. Nowhere is that sense of compelling deeper than in verses 10-11:

*That I may **know** Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. -Phil 3:10-11, NKJV (emphasis mine)*

Each time I read the words, *I want to know Him*, it is as if I can literally taste the longing in Paul's heart—because my own heart is filled with the very same longing.

I want to *know* Him.

If you are reading these words, it is likely that is the cry of your heart too.

But what does that really mean? What does it mean to *know* Him? Even more specifically, what does it mean to know Him *in the fellowship of His suffering*?

"We all know people who have been made much meaner and more irritable and more intolerable to live with by suffering: it is not right to say that all suffering perfects. It only perfects one type of person...the one who accepts the call of God in Christ Jesus."

-Oswald Chambers

I already mentioned some of what it *doesn't* mean, but to discover a bit about what it *does* mean, let's back up a little further. Earlier in chapter 3 (verses 4-6), Paul provides several details regarding his background. Really, it is a recap of his "spiritual pedigree." If anyone had any reason to feel proud of their spiritual heritage and accomplishments, it was Paul!

Yet despite his many accomplishments, Paul *willingly* laid down all his accomplishments and considered them "rubbish" for the sake of Christ. *But what things were*

gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ (vs.7). Paul wanted to *know* Christ—at absolutely *any* cost. All of this begs one simple question:

Why?

Now, if you’ve been in the Church for any period of time, you probably know the correct *theological* answer to that question. Paul gives it to us himself:

Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith. – Phil. 3:8-9

It is the great exchange—trading our filthy rags for God’s righteousness. Certainly, that is a gift worthy of our all! On some level, we all know it’s true. Yet a quick look around reveals that while most believers intellectually acknowledge this truth, *precious few live as though they actually believe it.*

But Paul was one who did.

Why did Paul consider Christ worth his all? I suggest it wasn’t simply because He was God and Paul wasn’t. I suggest it wasn’t because Paul knew it was the right doctrinal answer, or even because he knew he should be grateful for all God had done. Those things certainly are a part of the equation, but on their own they would have never carried Paul through the many things he suffered. The only power strong enough to overcome *any* obstacle is simple:

“And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”
– Ephesians 3:17-19 NIV

It’s Love.

More specifically, it is the love of God. Paul had personally *tasted* the love of God. Really, you could say Paul had learned to be-loved. And because he had “experience(d) the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully” (see Eph.3:19 NLT), Paul wanted to know the One who already *knew him* so intimately and perfectly.

Paul wanted to know the One:

~Who stood beside him and loved him when others abandoned him (see 2 Timothy 4:16-17).

~Who willingly laid down *everything* for him (see Phil 2:5-8).

~Who loved and pursued him, *even while he was still persecuting Jesus and the ones He loved* (see Acts 9:4).

This *isn't* just theology. It also isn't merely gratitude for salvation—as warranted and wonderful as that may be. **This is a *relationship* with a Person that is so deep, so compelling, and so utterly consuming, that nothing short of knowing Him intimately—in every way He is knowable—will ever suffice.**

Even if that means sharing His suffering.

By the time Paul wrote to the Philippians, he had known Jesus for many years—yet he realized there was still so much more of Him to know. Paul's life got turned inside out on that road to Damascus. A true encounter with God will do that to you. An encounter with *Love* will do that to you. Paul wanted to know Jesus—even in His suffering—because he encountered a love that was willing to suffer *for him*, even while he was still merrily persecuting the people of God. When you encounter *that* kind of love, everything else pales in comparison.

"Can we trust our lives, our futures, and the lives of those we love to God? Can we trust a God we can't control? Can we trust this God whose take on life and death and suffering and joy is so very different from our own? Yes. Yes, we can. Because we know him. And we know he is good."

- Stasi Eldredge

When Paul said "*I want to know him*"—he didn't put limits on what he would allow God to reveal of Himself. Most of us do. **But Paul knew there was a deep intimacy in shared suffering and he didn't choose his own comfort above a deeper knowledge of God's heart.** Paul willingly invited Jesus into his own suffering, and—when you consider the anguish Paul carried in his heart for his Jewish brethren, the way he continually poured himself out for the Church, and the ongoing persecution he suffered—it is clear Paul was also willing fellowship with Christ in His.

Because Paul allowed himself to be-loved, he allowed God to align his heart with His own. And because this great love had so deeply gripped his heart, Paul was willing to give anything and everything to make sure Jesus received "the pure spotless bride" He desired.

Long before Paul's awakening to love, Jesus had other disciples, including the twelve He poured His life into over a period of three years. He shared *every* part of life with them. Yet when it was time for Jesus to suffer—with the exception of John (and several of the women who served Him)—they all fled. I don't think it's any coincidence that John, the disciple who often self-identified as "*the disciple Jesus loved*," is the only one of the twelve who followed Jesus all the way to the cross. John, the one referred to as the "beloved disciple"—John who leaned his head against Jesus' chest—*this* John was among the few privileged to share Jesus' intimate final moments on earth as man.

Was it easy? I'm sure it couldn't have been. But in John's willingness to literally "be there" for Jesus in His suffering, he was an eyewitness to the deepest and most profound demonstration of love the world will ever know.

John was one of the few who "got it" even before the resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Fortunately, we have the benefit of hindsight and know how the story ends. I

don't think it is any accident that the verse in Philippians 3 mentions knowing Jesus in the "power of His resurrection" and *then* in the "fellowship of His suffering. Apart from knowing He is the Resurrection and the Life, most of us would never willingly lay down *our lives* for His.

Think of Peter, who was so filled with fear after Jesus was arrested that he denied even knowing Him. Not once, but three times! But once Peter encountered the restorative love of the risen Christ—a love that met him *in his deepest place of failure and regret*—he became unstoppable. This once fearful and impulsive "speak first, think later" disciple came to know the power of love in such a deep and intimate way that, according to tradition, when faced with his own death, he chose to be crucified upside-down not considering himself worthy to be crucified in the same manner as his Lord.

"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

—Rom. 5:8 NIV

Again, the point here isn't martyrdom or subjecting ourselves to sacrifices God isn't asking us to make. The point is that, like Paul, *I want to know Him*—at any cost. There are some revelations of His heart and character that cannot be known apart from the intimacy of shared suffering. Jesus was willing to go to any lengths to demonstrate His love. He hung on that cross naked, reviled, and rejected—*yet completely unashamed and undeterred in the depths of His love for us.*

"God wants to be loved for Himself, but that is only part. He also wants us to know that when we have Him we have everything."

-A.W. Tozer

Considering such great love—and considering such great *vulnerability* and *risk*—I want Him to have everything it cost Him so much to purchase. I want Him to have everything He desires from my life. I want to let Him into every area of my heart.

And I want to know *every* part of Him that is knowable.

Questions for digging deeper:

Why do you think it is important to let Him share *our* suffering before we can truly share *His*? List some Scripture references to support your thoughts.

What are some of the ways you can intentionally allow Him into your places of greatest pain and loss? Conversely, what are some of the ways you might be keeping Him out of those places?

Read Psalm 55:12-14, Isaiah 53:3-12, Luke 13:34, 1 Timothy 2:4, and 2 Timothy 3:12. How do these verses help you understand some of what knowing Him in the fellowship of His suffering” might look like?

Read 1 John 4:18. How might this verse apply when it comes to allowing God to share more of His own heart with us?

~Stir~

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet he did not sin.

-Hebrews 4:15

It is amazing to me that God not only knows everything about us, but that He actually *identifies with us* and *sympathizes with us* in our weakness and pain. Many years ago, He revealed this truth to me in a personally profound way.

I had not been walking closely with the Lord for all that long when I began serving in a ministry for single moms. It was my first time serving in any kind of leadership capacity, so it isn't difficult to imagine that I was encountering a fair amount of spiritual warfare as I stepped out into this new arena.

One time the “opposition” seemed especially intense. I was helping with a special event and the entire week of the event I felt like I was getting beat up one wall and down the next. I was dealing with the fallout from lot of long-term issues of rejection in general at that time, and let's just say the things I was experiencing were playing right into those old tapes. I was not feeling particularly loved or affirmed from *any* direction.

As worship began the night of our meeting, I was broken and spent. The worship leader began singing and, in the safety of God's presence, the dam in my heart burst. I poured my heart out to Jesus and found myself complaining to Him that I did not feel loved or supported. As soon as that plaintive cry escaped my lips, I saw a picture of Jesus on the cross and instantly felt incredibly ashamed of my whimpering. After all He did for me for the sake of love—who was I to not *feel* loved? As I contemplated the demonstration of His great love, I was expecting to hear a gentle rebuke for my unbelief and lack of perspective, but instead He said something that absolutely shocked me:

I know just how you feel, beloved. I didn't feel loved either.

No exhortation to quit whining and get it together. No backlash for my lack of gratitude. No conviction, and certainly no condemnation. Just compassion and comfort.

He knew how I felt. He *cared* how I felt. Despite His great suffering and sacrifice, He thought *my* suffering—though so ridiculously small in comparison—was important and He wanted me to know it.

"It is the kindness and mercy of the Lord that leads us to repentance."

—Rom. 5:8 NIV

I've never forgotten that and never will. That sweet moment of validation and understanding spoke volumes to my hurting heart and had far more impact than even the very gentlest rebuke could ever have had. He knew my need wasn't to be corrected—my need was to be heard and understood. To Him, my needs weren't small and unimportant; they were valid and very, very important to Him.

Your needs are important too. He wants you to really know and believe that. We have a myriad of unhealthy ways available to us to deal with our pain, but when we realize the Lover of our Souls:

~Knows *everything* about us

~Cares about *everything* that concerns us

~Wants to share *every* part of our lives

It really does bring such sweet freedom.

When we allow ourselves to be-loved in our brokenness and pain, we learn one of *the* most powerful spiritual lessons we can ever apprehend—and that is **learning to run to Him in our pain and brokenness rather than pushing away from Him in disappointment, shame, or regret.**

His arms are always open. Always. Remember—intimacy with God is *never* based on performance. Even when you feel like you should "get your act together"—God sees *and* cares about what you're going through.

"All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us. For the more we suffer for Christ, the more God will shower us with his comfort through Christ."

— 2 Corinthians 1:3-5 NLT

The astounding flip-side of this equation is that when we become secure in His love and know He is always willing to meet us where we are, our hearts authentically become more and more in tune with His. And when we become more in tune with His heart, we care about what He cares about. While God doesn't necessarily "need" our companionship—He is perfectly complete within Himself—He does *greatly desire it*. He longs for those who will press in to share the areas where His own heart

still breaks over the great brokenness in our world. Above all, I believe His heart aches that so many of His beloved children have yet to run into His open arms.

Some time back I had gotten distracted in the morning and did not spend time with the Lord. At some point later in the day, I finally made some time to re-connect with His heart. As I came bounding in to my own little “secret place” I cheerily called out, “Here I am Lord, Your wayward child!”

I wasn’t expecting a reply, but I got one anyway. One that stopped me dead in my tracks and brought me to my face in gut-wrenching intercession:

How I wish all my children were so wayward.

It wasn’t so much the words. It was *how* He said them. I could hear—and actually *feel*—the pain and longing in His voice. Momentary distractions or not, I was secure in His embrace. But many He loves are still so far from His heart. For them, He aches.

I could have moved on. I could have brushed that sweet, intimate glimpse into His heart aside and kept things light. But I chose to share the moment with Him. I allowed my heart to be broken by something that breaks His.

Those invitations await us all the time. The God of all Creation has made Himself knowable and vulnerable to us. He wants to walk through life with us—as Immanuel, the One who is always with us—deeply sharing our most intimate moments. Even more astounding, He wants to invite us to share His own heart—even the places of His greatest longing and heartache.

At the end of the age, each of us will stand before Him. Like so many, I want to finish *all* the work He’s given me to do. I desperately want to hear those precious words: “Well done good and faithful servant.” But there is one thing that propels me even more. Beyond failing to finish all my earthly assignments, it would devastate me to stand before Him on that day and make what I would consider to be an absolutely agonizing discovery:

That I could have known Him more.

I *don’t* want that to happen. Instead, I want to join Paul in the deepest cry of his heart:

That I may know Him.

I want to know Him in the power of His resurrection (we *need* the power of His resurrection!), but I also want to know Him in the fellowship of His suffering.

I want to know Him *every* way He is knowable.

How about you?

Questions for personal pondering:

Can you relate to the tenderness of God revealed in the story at the beginning of this section—why or why not?

Is it easier or more difficult for you to deeply connect with God:

-When you've failed (whether real or imagined)?

-When you're discouraged or disappointed?

-When you're experiencing sorrow or grief?

Do these answers reveal anything new to you about your relationship with the Lord?

Most of us, at one time or another, have missed God's invitations to share His heart at a deeper level. Can you think of a specific time that may have happened in your own life? If so, what did you learn?

~Start~

I hope some of the information in this week's lesson has been helpful and has also engaged your heart. Since these lessons are intended to be interactive between you and the Lord, the following simple suggestions are provided to help enhance your connection with His heart:

Copyright 2017 by Cindy Powell. All rights reserved.

Quiet Communion: Find a time when you can have a few moments of quiet. Prepare elements of communion and intentionally set your focus on the cross. You may find it helpful to re-read the gospel accounts of the Last Supper and/or Jesus' trial and death, focusing on whatever parts of the texts the Holy Spirit leads *you* to. With your focus fixed on this most glorious example of sacrificial love, ask the Lord to simply reveal His love personally *to you*, in whatever form that takes. As you feel ready, partake in the elements of communion in true union with Him.

Crafted prayer: Make a brief list of the things that stood out from this week's lesson. Turn those points (whether they are things you are thankful for, areas where you want to see change, places where you need to be more open to His Spirit, etc.) into a written prayer that specifically expresses your heart and desire. Consider praying this prayer frequently over the weeks and months ahead to keep it fresh in your heart.

Intentionally Seek His Heart: Make a commitment over the next week to intentionally set aside time to ask the Lord what's on *His* heart. Don't make it a point of striving—just ask, wait a few moments, and if you don't have any clear sense of what He may be showing you, move on. But keep asking in the days ahead. If you do have a clear sense of what He is sharing with you, ask Him how He wants you to respond. Consider making this a regular part of your personal devotional time (if it isn't already).