

080226 'For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (Romans 8:18-21)

If there is one thing that Paul knows about it is suffering. In the account from 2 Corinthians 11:23-28, Paul tells us he is an expert in this field from experience:

'Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. ²⁴ Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; ²⁶ on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; ²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. ²⁸ And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.'

Many of us who had endured so much would wear these trials with a badge of pride, or become utterly exhausted and run down by the remembrance of them. Not Paul; His motive lay in suffering these things, that the Good News of Jesus Christ be preached.

This gave him and the Good News an energy that is of its own; everything is for the sake of the gospel and that Paul should see the only one true glory that is worth contemplating; the kingdom of God and knowing the Lord Jesus Christ as he is fully known. His sufferings therefore, he feels, have no worth in comparison with the glory to be revealed to us.

Now Paul also happens to be an expert in this too. Remember, he caught a glimpse of it big time on the road to Damascus. There, he saw the Christ. There, he had to answer the painful question:

“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” (Acts 7:4-6)

Suffering and glory. The experience of the glory of the Lord clouds his judgement in the right way. As a Hebrew scholar, he would not be surprised that the world is the way it is today. They had much of the same problems then. He understood the fall of mankind in the account of Adam and Eve, and understood also that as a result of that disobedience, the whole of creation began to suffer and decay.

But Paul is unable to dwell on the misery of past or present misdeeds, because he has seen that bit of glory. It colours his outlook on everything. He has faith that God will come to rescue his creation and looks forward to the time when the glory of God will be fully restored and shared with his children. No wonder he says in v.23 that we groan inwardly while waiting for something better – adoption into God's family. That hope forms an important part of our belief. For though we do not see it, if we do not have that hope, we set ourselves at the level of atheists and agnostics, who only believe and trust in what they can see and what they want to see, even if they cannot see it.

Paul reminds us that as followers of Christ, we will see that which we hope for; that glory which, for the moment is beyond the vision of mere mortals. If we are prepared, like Paul, to endure the tough things in life that try to shake our faith, then we will see that glory, as that is the Lord's promise to us. We just need to be patient and look forward rather than dwell on the past.