

Joy and Sacrifice in the Lord

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Overview: The joy of the Lord is foundational for service in the mission field. A person with true joy is realistic, and acknowledges the many areas of suffering. Further, the author points out that embracing an attitude of sacrifice provides strength in the midst of depression, stress, struggles with burnout, sacrificial service and even suffering. While the Chinese Church had learned to accept suffering and sacrifice as a daily part of discipleship, pursuing joy is also essential and will strengthen one's resolve to serve the Lord.

In today's world happiness is almost considered a basic human right by many people, and happiness is often defined in a way that precludes suffering. This attitude has influenced the Church also, and I fear that the way we train people for the ministry does not adequately prepare them for the suffering that accompanies Christian ministry. I will try to respond to this problem below. This article is an expanded form of something I wrote in response to the concern that some of my prayer partners expressed recently when they knew that I was suffering from fairly severe exhaustion. This accounts for the many autobiographical sections in this article.

Commitment to Joy and to the Cross

I suppose you could call me a "Christian hedonist." I do not like this phrase (popularised by John Piper), but it correctly describes my desire. I am a pleasure seeker, seeking the joy of the Lord as an extremely important experience in life. I resonate with George Müller who said that the first and primary business that he ought to attend to everyday was to have his soul happy in the Lord.

However, I want to have this joy coming out of a lifestyle of taking up the cross. Jesus said that He wants us to have His joy so that our joy may be complete (John 15:11). But soon after that He commanded us to love each other, as He has loved us (v. 12). He then said, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (v. 13). So Christ is telling us that we must die for each other. But first there must be joy. Then the joy will issue in sacrificial service. Elsewhere Jesus said that, unlike the hired hand, He would die for the sheep (John 10:11-15). If we are sent into the world as the Father has sent Jesus (John 20:21), then we too must die for the sheep God entrusts to us. Recently I did a careful study on Jesus as our missionary model. I made the startling discovery that when Jesus is presented as a model for Christians, most often it is as a model of suffering (John 15:12, 13; Hebrews 12:2; 13:12, 13; 1 Peter 2:19-24; 4:1-2 etc.).

So on the one hand I want to pursue the joy of the Lord, and on the other hand I also want to pursue death for the sake of the people I am called to minister to. Over the past few years I have been attempting to grapple with this paradox. How can you have joy while you are dying for a cause?

Paul's life and ministry have influenced me greatly in this process. In Philippians he states that the joy of the Lord is an imperative for Christians (Philippians 4:4). But he wrote this while suffering in a prison. In fact, when he urged the Philippians to complete his joy by restoring unity there, he implied that he had lost his joy over their lack of unity (Philippians 2:2; cf. 4:2). He allowed himself to be hurt by and to lose a certain earthly joy over the sins of others while he preserved his joy in the Lord. He tells the wayward Galatians that he goes through the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in them (Galatians 4:19). He says that he faces "the daily pressure of his concern for all the churches. Who is weak," he says, "and I do not feel weak? Who is led to sin and I do not inwardly burn?" (2 Corinthians 11:28, 29). He said, "Death is at work in us, but life is at work in you....Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4:12, 16). How alien to modern ministry aspirations are these verses! Today we study much more about how to avoid stress than about how to take on the type of stress that Paul is talking about here.

I feel we should do everything required for a balanced life--have adequate sleep, observe the Sabbath principle, have times set apart for the family, for study, for exercise and fun. Most importantly, we must spend unhurried times with the Lord in prayer and in the Word. But while we do all this we must die for those we serve. And because we are called to die, there will be struggles and strains, burdens and persecutions.

Several years ago, in a Youth for Christ (YFC) training session, I shared how I struggle with a huge burden over the weaknesses and sins of the staff workers I lead. The teachers, who were from the West, were alarmed by this and prayed that I will be liberated from these burdens. I have thought much about that incident, especially because those teachers were fine Christians and insightful teachers. I have come to the conclusion that it is right for me to be burdened in this way. This stress that comes from concern is a part of my dying for my people. Did not Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah suffer depression over the problems of their people and weep over their sin (Jeremiah 9:1-2; Daniel 10:2, 3; Ezra 9:3-6; Nehemiah 1:1-2:3)?

Each time I return home from a preaching assignment abroad, I experience an acute sense of frustration. I have come to recognise that this is the frustration of making the transition from being a speaker to being a leader. As a speaker I am treated like a VIP. Much is done to make me comfortable, especially when I travel to the West. But as a biblical leader my lifestyle should be that of a servant (Mark 10:42-45). I am (perhaps I should say, "I should be") a servant of my family and of those I lead in YFC. Unfortunately their needs do not wait for my convenience and sometimes crop up at the most "inappropriate" times.

This was what Jesus experienced too. Mark 6:31 says, "... so many people were coming and going that [Jesus and the apostles] did not even have a chance to eat." This verse goes on to record Jesus' famous statement, "Come with Me to a quiet place by yourselves and get some rest." When we quote this statement we often overlook the fact that Jesus and His apostles did not get the rest they desired on this occasion. In fact Jesus went straight into teaching the crowds who had followed Him to His supposedly quiet place. He taught the 5000 there for a long time and then fed them. But He persevered with seeking solitude and found it by sending His disciples on a boat ride while "He went up on a mountainside to pray" (Mark 6:45,46). Here Jesus demonstrates the balanced life of a servant. He served the people even when it was inconvenient, but he persevered until He found time for the other essential disciplines of life, like the discipline of solitude.

Defining the Joy of the Lord

Perhaps at this stage I should attempt a definition of "the joy of the Lord." I believe it is an attitude to life that emerges from reckoning certain biblical truths about our lives. I am using the verb "reckon" in the sense it is used in Romans 6:11 (KJV--to reckon oneself dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Some newer translations render this verb, *logizomai*, as "count" (NIV) or "consider" (NRSV, NAS). To reckon is the act of accepting that certain things are true for us. Let me mention six things that we reckon about ourselves.

We reckon that the burden of the guilt of sin has been removed from us because we have been forgiven (Hebrews 10:22). With a cleansed conscience we can have a great sense of freedom. If God does not reckon (*logizomenos*) our sin (2 Corinthians 5:19), then we do not need to either.

We reckon that God has loved us so much that He has sent his Son to die for us and for our salvation (Romans 5:8). We know that realising that we are loved is a great trigger of joy. As Christ's is the greatest possible love (John 15:13), it should trigger the greatest possible joy (John 15:11).

We reckon and are amazed by the fact that God has entered into an intimate relationship with us and regards us as His beloved children (1 John 3:1). People may disappoint us, but God is our never-disappointing and constant companion (Hebrews 13:5, 6). He is the most important person and factor in our lives (Philippians 1:21). And sometimes in our relationship with Him we have moments close to ecstasy: "You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand" (Psalm 16:11).

We reckon that God has invested us with significance by making us princes and princesses in the eternal kingdom of God and giving us a vital role in the agenda of His eternal kingdom (2 Corinthians 5:20). This, of course, means that we do not need to be jealous of or feel threatened by anyone else (1 Corinthians 12:14-26), thus eliminating a major cause for the loss of joy in our lives.

We reckon that the God who loves us and is committed to our welfare (Romans 8:32) is also sovereign. Therefore we know that if we are obedient to Him, in all things he will work for our good (Romans 8:28). No circumstance or person can thwart God's good plan for our lives. God will turn even the most painful incidents into something good (Genesis 50:20). This fact gives us no adequate reason to be bitter over what anyone has done to us, thus eliminating another major cause for the loss of joy.

We reckon that we are bound for the glorious Promised Land of heaven, for which we wait with eager anticipation (Philippians 1:22-23). The frustration that the world has been subjected to, and in which we participate, will not be found in heaven, thus completing the redemption of which we now only have a foretaste (Romans 8:20-24). For us to live is Christ, a great reason for joy; and to die is gain, a greater reason for joy (Philippians 1:21).

Is it possible that reckoning these truths can indeed produce joy? It is, because this eliminates the force of those things that take away joy by reminding us of six great reasons for being joyful! And those six reasons are eternally true in contrast to those things that take away joy, which are temporary. Joy that is founded upon such realities can co-exist with sorrow, pain, disappointment, and righteous anger. But it cannot co-exist with bitterness, selfish anger, and despair, for those are attitudes that contradict the six realities.

Joy and Feelings of Depression

I am going to dare to say that the joy of the Lord can even co-exist with our common experiences of depression, as well as be of help to clinical, major depression, often of bio-chemical origins. Good and conscientious Christians, especially those who are in the so-called helping professions, often experience depression. Things like tiredness, sickness, loneliness, negative response to our work, or a sense of failure can trigger this. While we may be feeling terrible, the six realities tell us that there is a deeper reality to those feelings. Reckoning those six realities helps us bear the pain, for we are able to look at life with a positive attitude. Depression (a feeling) will then not turn into despair (an attitude). A ray of light creeps through the gloom and helps sustain us till the depression passes.

I have found that these thoughts help me a lot when I suffer from feelings of depression. As a result of the reckoning and the attitude change that results from it we may be motivated to take steps that help us handle the depression constructively. We may decide to get some extra sleep or rest or recreation or exercise. We may decide to take off and spend some extra time with family or with friends. We may share our pain with someone else. We may go and talk to the people with whom we are upset. Of course, I am not discounting the important role that a professional physician or counsellor can play in situations of extreme depression.

What I want to stress most of all here is that devout and victorious Christians may sometimes feel terrible, just as Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Paul did, as expressed in the verses we quoted in the previous section. We must not forget that "laments" represent an important type of biblical literature. There are about fifty laments in the books of Psalms making lament the largest category of Psalms. So those who are lamenting in the Bible were great people of God, not people in a back-slidden state. Yet two typical features of the lament psalms show us that lament can co-exist with the joy of the Lord, as we have defined it in this article. They are the "statement of confidence in God" (Psalm 22:3-5) and the "vow to praise God" (Psalm 22:22-26).

Sri Lanka is a land devastated by war, suffering, violence and corruption. I have come to believe that lament must be an integral part of the life of all Christians living in Sri Lanka. Not to lament may be evidence of callous disregard for the needs of our people. For most Christians there are reasons for lament that are closer to home than the devastation of a nation. We may groan as see loved ones suffering or living in rebellion from God. Sometimes we may groan because of the pain that wracks our own bodies.

Paul gave a theological basis for lament when he said, “We ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:23). Living as we do in a world subjected to frustration (Romans 8:20), we will groan until we get to heaven. Then a few sentences later, in verse 26, using a noun (*stenagmos*) directly related to the verb “groan” (*stenazō*) which he used in verse 23, Paul says, “the Spirit himself intercedes for us with *groans* that words cannot express” (Romans 8:26). Even God is groaning! So I try to tell myself and others when we suffer from bad feelings, “Don’t feel bad about feeling bad. This may be a necessary experience along God’s joyful pathway.” Thinking such thoughts takes away some of the despair that is often associated with bad feelings in the lives of Christians.

Pursuing Joy

But how could we reckon biblical truths about ourselves so as to have the joy of the Lord? Don’t most Christians--happy ones and unhappy one--accept each of these six features as essential parts of their theology? They do; but we must let these theological truths travel down from the mind (where they are stored) to the heart so that they could challenge and influence our attitudes. This process may not be as easy as it seems. I think one of the saddest things I have seen in recent years in Sri Lanka is the phenomenon of angry Christian workers. Often they are angry at the Church and its leaders because of the way they have been treated. My belief in the indispensability of joy has been greatly challenged over the years, living as I do in a land filled with corruption, lawlessness, violence, and ethnic strife. Yet I have seen people who, while having every reason to be very bitter and angry, radiantly exhibit the joy of the Lord.

One of my first conscious struggles for joy in my Christian life was when I was a university student. My heart was in the ministry, but I was studying Botany, Zoology, and Chemistry for my degree. One-third of our grades was given for practical work done in the laboratory. But I was terribly clumsy with my hands. The result was that I never did well in my studies, even though I worked hard at them. I would often struggle with deep discouragement. During this time I got into the habit of going for long walks. I would not turn back to return to where I was staying until I had a sense that the joy of the Lord was restored. Sometimes this did not happen for a long time, but I would persevere in grappling with the Lord until his joy returned. When that happened I would turn to come back and then give myself to intercession during the walk back.

Since beginning “full-time” ministry, things have become a little more complex. My hurt and anger come now from people I was ministering among, and the wounds are a little deeper. But the same principle of grappling with the Lord till the joy returned has served me well. Sometimes it takes longer for the joy to return. Often an issue I thought I had settled with the Lord and buried resurfaces to torment me with bitterness. This means that I now have to be even more conscientious in my battle for the joy of the Lord. But most often the victory will not come until I can heartily affirm, without any reservation, that God is going to turn this thing that I resent into something good and therefore I do not need to be angry or anxious.

Joy and Spiritual Disciplines. Over the years I have discovered some aids to reckoning that have helped me. Prayer is the first aid that comes to mind. But I will discuss this later. Next comes reading the Scriptures. The year 1989 was one of the bleakest times in our nation, and estimates of the death toll for the year from an attempted revolution went as high as 60,000. There was almost never a time when there wasn’t a body floating on the river at the edge of our town. And most of the dead were young people, the people God has called me to serve. Schools were closed a lot of the time, and this meant that our children were at home. Many people left the country during this time saying it was for the sake of their children. But we believed that God wanted our family to stay on in Sri Lanka no matter what happened.

We had, however, to think about the welfare of our children. My wife and I felt that the greatest legacy we could leave for our children was a happy home. This was a challenge considering that there were so many political and social things that we legitimately needed as Christians to be angry and

upset about. Despite the surrounding national gloom I needed to help keep the home bright. And my moods were not helping with this! One day when I was in one of my bad moods, my wife told the children loud enough for me to hear (our wives have a way of doing that!), “Thaththi (Daddy) is in a bad mood, let’s hope he will go and read his Bible.” She had hit upon a very important theological principle. When we are overwhelmed by temporal circumstances, we must fix our eyes on the deeper realities of life: those unchanging truths in Scripture that enable us to look at life from the perspective of God’s sovereignty. This is why the Psalmist said, “If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction” (Psalm 119:92).

I have also found that spending time with the hymnbook to be a great remedy for the loss of joy. Here again, when we don’t have thoughts to lift us up because of what we are experiencing, we are reminded of eternal truth by the writings of others. And those thoughts are set to music, the language of the heart. This enhances the process of truth travelling from the mind to the heart. So when Paul and Silas sang hymns to God in the jail in Philippi (Acts 16:25) they were using an effective remedy for discouragement.

Joy from Counseling and Community. I have, however, had to minister with some Christian workers for whom the process of the recovery of joy is much harder. This is partly because they carry wounds, often inflicted in childhood, that have not been healed. When those wounds are touched extreme reactions often result. I am thankful for people like David Seamands who, through books like, *Healing for Damaged Emotions*, have alerted us to this problem. The title of that book suggests that even these wounds can be healed. I think it is very significant that in 1 Corinthians 13:5 where we are told that love “keeps no record of wrongs,” the verb used is *logizomai* from which we get the idea of reckoning. Healing comes when we cease to reckon the hurts we have received by letting God’s love in us overcome the hurt of the wounds with which we have been inflicted.

This process of healing may be lengthy, and may call for much patience. But I believe that it is completed only when God’s love can break through with healing so that the wounds will not anymore hinder us from reckoning the six great truths that I have described. A sensitive and caring community, where hurt Christian workers can experience the acceptance that such costly, group commitment provides, can do much in bringing healing to them. Often trained counsellors could play an important role in the healing process by dealing with issues in a way that untrained people find difficult. However, the work of counsellors would be greatly enhanced through the support of a community that practices costly commitment to its members. Would that all our ministry teams were such communities!

Actually, I think that we cannot separate the joy of the Lord from the community of the Lord. All of Christianity is lived in community. While each individual is ultimately responsible for ensuring that his or her quest for the joy of the Lord is carried through conscientiously, the community can do much in mediating this joy to us. As I think of the times that I have been deeply hurt in ministry and the struggles that I have had with bitterness over these hurts, I also think of the way God used my friends and colleagues to heal me of the pain. They listened to me; they advised me about how I should respond to the situation; and the act of verbally sharing my pain with them did much help give me release from the burden of hurt that I was carrying.

After someone has hurt us we could be so upset that we could extend our anger with particular people to cover all people in general. This is the attitude that says that humans cannot and must not be trusted because they always fail us. There are many such angry people around in the world today. When our friends lend a sympathetic ear and minister lovingly to us we lose our reason for being angry at humanity. We sense that our friends are suffering with us in our pain, as Paul said they should (1 Corinthians 12:26; Galatians 6:2). That takes away that lonely bitterness that destroys whatever vestiges of joy there is left in us.

So God often mediates his joy through the loving concern of committed Christian friends and colleagues. Much of the biblical descriptions of joy are given in the context of the community such as the famous verse “the joy of the Lord is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:10).

What I am going to write now seems so basic that it may look out of place in a book like this. But it is something that I have seen so often in my life and that of my colleagues that it should be mentioned. One of the commonest causes for the loss of joy in Christian workers is sin that has not been dealt with biblically. I have seen this so much that, when I find a colleague who has become unusually judgmental or who flies into a rage unusually quickly, one of the first questions I ask is whether he or she is burdened by some guilt that has not been cleared. Asking forgiveness from God and from those who have been affected by our sin and other forms of restitution are essential features in the processes of recovery from sin and restoration of joy (Psalm 51).

Unbiblical Stress

So, amidst the stresses and strains of ministry, we conscientiously pursue the joy of the Lord. Indeed suffering is an essential ingredient of ministry, and stress and strain are two of the commonest expressions of suffering in a minister’s life today. But not all the stress we face today is biblical. I have found much help from what some Western authors, especially Dr. Archibald Hart, have written about stress. I believe that there are two types of unbiblical stress commonly experienced by Christian workers.

Stress from Wrong Motives

The first is the stress that comes from sinful ambitions for success--mixed motives. We want our church or organisation to grow, or our book to be the best in its field. This often leads to a workaholicism arising from the fact that we find our primary fulfilment in striving for earthly goals. Those with this problem don’t know how to take a Sabbath rest because they get too much fulfilment from work and success. This gives rise to a lot of stress, and failure becomes a huge burden.

I think some of us will battle with earthly ambition all our lives. Besides it is often difficult to know when godly ambition has given way to earthly ambition. This problem is particularly acute among leaders because often they have come to the position of leadership through sheer determination and ambition, in part by overcoming a strong sense of insecurity and inferiority. This could be a great testimony to God’s grace. But it is also possible for such leaders to find too much security and identity through success.

I think God in his mercy permits us to have failures and irritations to make us aware of the problem of fleshly motivation and to purge us of its dross. A well-prepared program that we lead is ruined because of rain or because of the careless mistake that someone else makes. After working hard at a sermon we make a mistake during its delivery, and the people seem to focus more on the mistake than on the content of the sermon. Someone we regard as our spiritual child acts in a way that is unbecoming of a Christian. I find that often after I have written a book or article on a certain topic a problem emerges in our ministry that shows how much we fall short in this same area that I have written on!

Our response to these failures and irritations brings into focus what our inner motivations are. Our overreactions show how much selfishness and fleshly motivation there is in us. And the corresponding battle to deal with these situations biblically is used by God to refine us and purify our motives. They become the disciplines about which Hebrews 12:4-11 talks. Verse 11 brings this passage to a climax: “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”

The blessing, of course, is only “for those who have been trained by it.” These are those who acknowledge that they have a problem, who seek God’s forgiveness, and who apologise to those who have been hurt by their excessive reactions. Some will get even angrier because of the “discipline”

and that will only increase their stress. Others will thank God for the rebuke and pray for grace to have more pure motives in their service for God. They experience “a harvest of righteousness and peace.” Peace, of course, is the opposite of stress.

Stress from Poor Delegation

The other type of unbiblical stress comes from an unwillingness to delegate. Jethro pointed out this problem to his son-in-law Moses (Exodus 18). All Christians have gifts, and it is the leader's responsibility to enable others to exercise their gifts. So we will always be delegating responsibilities to others. If we do not do this, we will end up bearing unnecessary burdens. We will go to see sick people that others could see. We will speak at meetings that others should speak at. This often comes from a messiah-complex that causes us to think that we are the ones who must do all the important things in our ministries. We will end up driving ourselves to the ground.

One of the most complex challenges that we face as we mature in ministry is to learn what our priorities are and to let our schedules reflect those priorities. We must really discipline ourselves to refuse many opportunities for ministry that are outside our primary calling. Indeed we die for those we lead, but we are not called to save the whole world. Only the eternal God can do that.

Even the biblical commands limit the scope of the people for whom we are called to lay down our lives. Jesus speaks of our friends (John 15:12-14) and Paul of our wives (Ephesians 5:25). Now I do not think this is an absolute restriction. We can die for others too! But I do feel that it is biblical to say that we have a special responsibility to some people whom God has called us to serve. Those are the people we should concentrate on. Hence we simply can not kill ourselves trying to solve every problem that we encounter.

This is easier said than done, of course. I believe it is so important to identify our primary callings. For me, they are to Youth for Christ, to my home church, to itinerant Bible teaching, and to writing. This means that there are many things which people expect me to do that I should not do. Hopefully my family and my fellow leaders in Youth for Christ and church understand this. But I have had to face some criticism from others about my non-involvement in several programs and causes. I know, however, that despite my commitment to the principles outlined above there are a lot of things that I agree to do which I should not be doing. I guess this will be a battle that I will have to fight all my life.

Burnout and Prayer

While unbiblical stress must be avoided, we must affirm that stress and strain are inevitable in ministry, as in life. I demonstrated this earlier, using quotations from Paul's Epistles. As a family man, active in grassroots ministry and leadership who also tries to do some speaking and writing, I have experienced a fair share of this stress. Some of my friends have warned me that I will get burnt out soon. I listen carefully to their concern, and consider how to make adjustments and continue on in the ministry. I believe that time spent daily lingering in the presence of God is a great antidote to burnout and other ill effects of stress. Let me tell you why I think this is so.

If spending a good time with God each day is a non-negotiable factor in our daily calendar, then this time could really help slow us down and heal that unhealthy restlessness and rushed attitude that could cause burnout. There are few things that help heal our restlessness as time spent lingering in the presence of God. If a fixed time has been set apart each day, then there is no point rushing through the exercise as we are going to spend that amount of time whether we rush or not. Therefore we are forced to change gears from stressful rush to restful lingering in the presence of God. In recent years I have become more and more convinced of the value of this shift of gears to slow down the terrible malady of drivenness to which we leaders are susceptible. Uncontrolled activity without slowing down feeds our tendency to be driven people. Driven people could drive themselves and others to the ground either through tiredness or through breaking Christian principles in their relentless pursuit of success.

Times alone with God (and also Sabbaths faithfully kept) help battle the natural tendency of motivated leaders to become driven people. An hour or more spent each day in the presence of the almighty and sovereign Lord of the universe does wonders to our sense of security (Psalm. 46:1-11), the lack of which is another cause of burnout. With security comes “the peace of God which transcends all understanding” (Philippians 4:7) which is surely a wonderful treasure with which to live life. When we do not have security in our relationship with God, we will be restlessly running from activity to activity subconsciously hoping that our activity would fill the void in our lives. We are, in fact, afraid to stop and be silent before God. I once heard the Singaporean Church leader Dr. Robert Solomon say, “We are uncomfortable with silence because silence forces us to face God.” So we go on with our busy activity till we drive ourselves to the ground!

Paul says that the peace that I just described is the result of presenting our requests to God (Philippians 4:6). When we spend time with God we are able to “cast all [our] anxiety on Him because He cares for [us]” (1 Peter 5:7). It was during a time of deep crisis in our ministry that I discovered the great release that comes from consciously handing over our burdens to God. I used to have difficulty going to sleep because I was overwhelmed by worry over the situation. I learned to confess my inability to bear these burdens alone and to place them upon God by a conscious act of release. And release was what I felt as a result of this.

If, during our time with God, a lot of time is spent in intercession, we have become conduits of love. When we pray for others love is flowing out of our lives. But this is not a love that drains us of our emotional strength. We are praying, which means that we are in touch with Him who is the inexhaustible source of love. As love goes out through prayer, God’s love comes in, and the regular flow of love in and out of our lives makes us glow with the joy that love alone can produce.

So our time spent with God each day becomes the most refreshing thing that we do. Such freshness attacks those triggers of burnout that often accompany the stresses and strains of costly ministry. In recent years there has been a welcome return to emphasizing the value of corporate worship among Evangelicals. Perhaps the time is also ripe for resolutely returning to the value of one’s personal time with God.

Sacrifice from Commitment to Community

Often when my Western friends hear of all the problems we face in our war-torn country, they tell me something like, “We don’t realise how fortunate we are to live in the West where we don’t have all these problems.” If I am able to respond to this I usually say that the biggest pain I have experienced has not been in connection with the war in the land but in connection with Christian community life. And that pain is not confined to our nation. Anyone practising true biblical community-life in any part of the world will experience much pain. We all fall short and fail each other. Sometimes, though, this pain is avoided by inappropriately lowering one’s standards of community life. I fear this has happened a lot in the church today.

If you were to make a list of all the times Paul talks about his sufferings in the Epistles, you would be amazed at how often his commitment and love to those in the Christian community caused his pain. He talks about his physical sufferings and sometimes even gives a comprehensive listing of them (2 Corinthians 6:4-10; 11:23-27). But it is when he describes his relationship problems with his fellow Christians that he shows his deepest feelings of pain. In 2 Corinthians 2 he expresses his inward turmoil about the opposition to him that had surfaced in Corinth. He was in Troas awaiting the arrival of Titus whom he had sent to Corinth with a severe letter. Titus had not come yet, and he was in so much turmoil that he could not even preach the gospel though a door of opportunity to do so had opened for him. So he went on to Macedonia (2 Corinthians 2:12-13). Titus eventually brought good news of the Corinthians’ remorse over the way they had hurt Paul. He was so thrilled about this that remembering it prompted his rapturous outburst on the glory of the ministry that forms the heart of 2 Corinthians (2 Corinthians 2:14-7:1). Later he explains, “But God, who comforts the downcast,

comforted us by the coming of Titus” (2 Corinthians 7:6). All this shows how deeply Paul was hurt, and comforted, by his relationships.

When we love deeply, we also hurt deeply. Many people do not want to be hurt in this way. So they stay at a safe distance from others. They do not commit themselves too deeply to others and are not very open with them, for that would make them vulnerable to hurt. Paul, on the other hand, opened himself up to others and was often deeply hurt by their rejection. He expresses his vulnerability in 2 Corinthians 6:11-12: “We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us” (2 Corinthians 6:11-12; cf. 1 Thessalonians 2:8).

So when we open ourselves to others and express costly commitment to them, we become vulnerable to pain. Paul expresses this pain vividly in his Epistles. In 2 Corinthians 11:28-29 he says, “I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?” In Galatians 4:19-20 he says, “My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!” (See also 2 Corinthians 2:4, 12-13; 7:5-7; 12:15; Colossians 1:24; 2:1; 1 Thessalonians 3:5-7).

We avoid much of the pain from community that Paul talks about by lowering our standards for what we expect from others. In the early church “all the believers were one in heart and mind” (Acts 4:32). This must have been difficult to achieve. That is why Paul has to urge the Christians in Philippi to work hard at achieving it (Philippians 2:2; 4:2-3). In Acts we find that the members shared a oneness of mind even in the area of possessions (Acts 2:42-46; 4:32).

Many Christians consider this type of community life too difficult to achieve. It is too much of a threat on their personal independence and too time-consuming for our efficiency-oriented age. So they have settled for a model of community life that is governed by rules and tasks. Problems are dealt with in terms of conformity to the rules of the group or the tasks people have been assigned. If the crisis is fairly serious, an inquiry is held and some action is taken based on the findings. The problem is dealt with efficiently, but is this the biblical method appropriate for Christian communities where personal relationships are so important?

I think a more biblical method is the more painful method of dealing with problems pastorally. I am not saying that rules are unimportant. I am saying that pastoral care is more important, even though it is much more time-consuming and perhaps much more painful. When someone breaks a rule we talk to the person and try to find out the cause for it. In solving the problem we may choose to institute some disciplinary action against the person. But the person is comprehensively ministered to in the process. We are rarely adopting this approach today. Many Christian leaders think that such pastoral responses to problems are not practical, are too painful, and too time-consuming. The person who has done something wrong may be very angry with the leader, and when we deal with him pastorally this anger may surface. It may take three hours to complete the conversation. Many leaders don't have so much time and energy to give to those they lead. The great biblical leaders, like Jesus and Paul, however, spent such quality time with those they led (see John 1:39; Acts 20:8).

It seems to be much more efficient and effective to adopt approaches to organizational problems which are derived from secular management practices rather than from the Bible. There is a refreshing rediscovery of the importance of commitment to people among some “secular” management thinkers. But I do not think that we can ever expect the world to adopt the principle that Jesus taught in John 15 that, in a community, members die for each other (vv. 12-14). In the Christian method of community life the leader “dies” for those who have done wrong by going through a long drawn-out process of listening to them, of being exposed to their bitterness, and of ministering to them in depth. The inconvenience and pain of this process is part of the suffering of Christian community life of which I am speaking.

Indeed, though the John 15 type of community life is time-consuming and painful, it also brings a depth of joy and fulfillment that few things on earth can match. In 2 Corinthians Paul speaks a lot about his pain over his relationship with the Corinthians. But he also describes his sheer joy triggered by their positive response to him. In Philippians Paul pleads for unity (4:2) and says that his joy is made complete only when they are “like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose” (2:2). But he also describes the Philippians as “my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown” (4:1). This then is a life with deep pain, but it is also a life of deep fulfillment.

Yet, as in the case of the other forms of suffering that we have talked about in this article, amidst all the pain of community we must experience the joy of the Lord. Without that we would not have the strength to take on the pain that comes with community life. We have this bedrock confidence in God who has said that, even though a mother may forget the baby at her breast, He will not forget us (Isaiah 49:15). That gives us the strength to open ourselves in deep commitment to others, which in turn makes us vulnerable to deep hurt. But we are able to handle the pain when our Christian brothers and sisters hurt us because our strength comes from something more basic to life than human relationships: the joy that comes from our relationship with God.

I think the sequence in Philippians 4:1-4 is very significant. First Paul describes the Philippians as his joy and crown (v.1). The Philippian Christians made him very happy. Then he pleads with two warring factions to unite (vv. 2-3). This is a description of his pain. In fact elsewhere in Philippians he implies that the lack of unity in the church took away some of his joy (Phil. 2.2). In Philippians 4:4 Paul comes to a non-negotiable essential of the Christian life when twice he asks his readers to rejoice in the Lord and to do so always (v. 4). That’s what true Christian community life is like. There will be times of pain and there is joy over each other, but always there must be the joy of the Lord.

Sacrificing for the Community as an Antidote to Drivenness

There is one more area related to the topic of suffering and community that needs to be addressed. I believe it is very relevant to the problem of driven leadership that we are seeing in the church today. Community, like prayer, can also act as a preventive to drivenness. Good and motivated leaders have great goals that they will somehow achieve. But they become driven leaders when they break Christian principles and drive themselves and others in an unhealthy way in achieving those goals. If, however, these motivated leaders have submitted to the body of Christ as represented by the community to which they belong, they will encounter many obstacles to their success. And attending to these will sometimes appear to be a great sacrifice.

A member of the community may not be in agreement with the plans, and trying to persuade that person may take a long time and hold up progress. The driven leader may ignore the dissenter and carry on with the program. A motivated, but Christian, leader would give the time and energy required for working toward winning the dissenter’s approval.

In the heat of the battle to achieve the goal, some people are invariably going to get hurt. The motivated leader may be tense because of the pressure of the huge project, and that may express itself in a temper tantrum that leaves someone very hurt. Sometimes it may simply be a misunderstanding between two members of the team. Often tension in the leader’s family comes in the middle of a project because the leader tends to neglect or be impatient with his or her family at such a time. A driven leader may ignore the hurt people and pursue the goal. A motivated, but Christian, leader will take the time to minister to the hurt people.

When such problems emerge it would look like a huge sacrifice to the leader to stop the hard work towards achieving the goal to deal with them. But I have found that such interruptions are God’s way to getting us to put first things first. So we take what seems like an enormously costly step of holding back our activities in order to minister to the community. Of course, that step is usually well worth the trouble because as a result of it the members of the community are united and therefore they can work much more effectively. The end product will be so much more honoring to God with the whole

community (including our families) enjoying its fruit and therefore the joy of the success being more complete. In the process the motivated leader is saved from the trap of becoming a driven leader. He or she stopped from the busy activity to attend to something that is demanded by Christian principles. Drivenness is expressed in busy and ambitious activity that is done in a way that breaks Christian principles.

Anticipating and Accepting Suffering

It seems to me that the general approach to suffering in most churches in missionary-sending nations and the way that missions is marketed today does not adequately prepare missionaries for life on the mission field. So much is told about the excitement of missions that people are not adequately prepared for the cost of missions. Churches in the west may teach people on how to respond to suffering, but they may neglect teaching people on the indispensability of suffering--a doctrine clearly taught in the New Testament.

If missionaries are going to truly identify with and become servants of those they are called to serve, they will face severe frustration and what initially looks like failure and fruitlessness. If they have not been adequately prepared for this, the pain of suffering would be greater than it needs to be. It often results in disillusionment and deep disappointment with God. Disappointment with God is one of the hardest things to bear, for it deprives us of one the greatest antidotes to suffering: hoping in God.

I wonder if some missionaries, in order to avoid suffering and pain, are opting to not identify fully with the people they are going to serve. Their lifestyle or their refusal to be vulnerable distances them from the people. Those who join with them may do so for wrong motives, hoping that some of the wealth of the missionary will trickle down to them. These are unscrupulous people who will soon be found out. The missionaries may end up being deceived by them. Unfortunately many conclude that all "the nationals" are not to be trusted. The true picture is that the missionaries were so distant to the people that many persons of integrity did not feel inclined to associate too closely with them.

I think the commonest expression of suffering for missionaries today is severe frustration. When faced with this the missionaries may change their work to something less frustrating. Instead of the difficult experience of working with a group of believers they may become consultants who offer their expertise to various groups without the pain of having to work closely with one group. One called to evangelize a people group that is resistant to the gospel may shift to evangelising a people group who are more responsive to the gospel. Some, after seeing no evangelistic results, abandon the tough work of evangelization and opt for a teaching ministry. Some will return home after their first term or in the middle of their first term, deeply disillusioned and even perhaps angry with the missionary mobilizers who did not adequately prepare them for the suffering they encountered.

I want to encourage as many national Christians and missionaries as I can to constantly bear in mind that suffering is an indispensable feature of discipleship. Then when it comes they will not be surprised and they will know how to respond to it biblically. But if I am to encourage Christians in this way, I will need to suffer as they do. Unfortunately, unlike Paul did when he suffered for the church (Colossians 1:24), I don't always embrace this suffering joyfully. In fact, I often give into self-pity and start grumbling. So I have to spend time grappling and theologizing so that I could learn to be joyful in the midst of suffering. This article is the fruit of such grappling.

Final Thought

Our fundamental call in Scripture is to have fellowship with Jesus (I Corinthians 1:9). Joy and suffering are part of this call. So we approach each day seeking to ensure that our souls are happy in the Lord. And we also approach each day with a desire to be living sacrifices. We know, of course, that this same sacrifice will be the pathway to deeper joy, and a closer relationship with Him!

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Reflection and Discussion

1. Recall some examples where joy and suffering were inseparable for you. What did you learn from these experiences?
2. The author describes six types of “reckoning”? Which ones are part of your life and which ones do you need to work on?
3. Are there some examples of “unbiblical stress” that are affecting you? If so, what can help you change these?
4. Spending good time with the Lord is seen by the author as a “non-negotiable.” What does this mean practically for you in your life?
5. There is joy in the Lord even when there is pain in/from community life. To what extent is this joy part of your life?

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