



Suffering, Success and "The Day of Salvation"

by Edward Fudge

In this day of "success"-oriented religion focused on fleshly desires, human efforts and carnal pride, the story of Paul and his Corinthian opponents is particularly timely. That story is detailed in the Epistle we call 2 Corinthians. Although the story is nearly two thousand years old, the professing church today desperately needs to learn three truths from it:

1. That there is a great gulf between "Christianity" which breathes the carnal spirit of antichrist and that which lives from faith in God who raises the dead.
2. That Paul's personal suffering was to be expected, for it was in the steps of the Suffering Messiah, who died in "weakness" and claimed victory only through apparent defeat.
3. That the Messiah was thus foretold by the prophet Isaiah, particularly in chapters 49, 50 and 53, as Paul himself shows frequent evidence of knowing.

A look at 2 Corinthians reveals much about our hearts. Paul and his opponents force us to evaluate our own hope, our own security and our own estimation of "success" and "failure."

The Spirit of Christ and the Spirit of Antichrist

In 2 Corinthians 6:2 Paul states, "Now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation." "The day of salvation" meant two entirely different things to Paul and his adversaries at Corinth. In that difference we see two opposing spirits which affect every other estimation and judgment and which motivate and shape practically every word and action.

To Paul's opponents at Corinth, "the day of salvation" signaled glory and glamour, power and prestige, recognition and renown. In this light Paul's personal weakness and suffering testified against his apostleship and cast doubts on the authenticity of his entire ministry. Some of Paul's converts were beginning to be persuaded by such reasoning.

These unnamed opponents gloried in fleshly appearances (5:12; 11:18). They heaped lavish commendations on one another although they could point to no substantial fruit of their labor (3:1; 10:12, 18). They claimed to be particularly "choice" Christians; Paul sarcastically calls them "super-apostles" (11:5; 12:11). They claimed to have known Jesus in the flesh (5:16).

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Their "Jesus" was above all else the worker of miracles, the powerful one whose presence always meant strength and victory over all foes (11:3, 4). Paul, on the other hand-they were quick to point out-was frequently the object of persecution, more often "down" than "up." Both he and his gospel were too bruised and bleeding to suit these "positive-thinking," "victory-and-success" oriented preachers. When Paul preached, they said, you could hardly stifle a gag for the heavy scent of death (2:14-16). Their minds were tuned to what is earthly, outer, transient. They walked by "sight."

For Paul "the day of salvation" is altogether different. It does not guarantee "success" to gospel ministers at all in worldly terms. More likely, they are persecuted in every way (6:4, 5). God does not view His ministers the way men do (6:8-10). Paul has the mind of Christ, and he adjusts his vision to what is inward, unseen and eternal. He walks by "faith" (4:16-5:7). God does give a guarantee to His people-the Holy Spirit-but He guarantees full redemption when Christ returns, not a trouble-free life now (1:22; 5:5). How our generation needs to recover the sense of gospel perspective in the matter of judging "success"! Antichrist still points to the glamour of the forbidden fruit (11:3). He still offers this world's power and glory to any who will fall down and worship him (11:12-15).

Paul's Sufferings and Christ's

If Paul's opponents called attention to his personal weakness, failures and notable lack of "success," he was not embarrassed in the least. He did not hide his weakness, deny his persecutions or cover up his calamities. As a "fool" he could even glory in them (11:30; 12:9). He readily conceded the fact of all this. On this point he and his adversaries were in total agreement.

But when it came to the significance of Paul's circumstances, the opposing spirits became manifest. The true picture became clear. It was actually (to borrow figures

from the book of Revelation) Slain Lamb versus Boasting Beast. Paul's detractors listed his troubles under "liabilities." He saw them as "assets," commendations of his ministry, certifying that it was genuine (6:3-5).

Yet Paul did not see his afflictions as meritorious within themselves nor as badges of personal courage and valor. This was not "sour grapes" or the rationalization of a loser. Paul was not saving face by developing a theology of failure. He was no masochist, nor was he psychologically unbalanced (though his opponents also made that charge-5:13). Rather, his afflictions were signs of his union with Christ, who also suffered humiliation, abuse and defeat, but in the end was vindicated through trust in God. ("Vindicated through trust" is verbally the same as "justified through faith," though with a different emphasis.)

"We share abundantly in Christ's sufferings," Paul said (1:5). If some detected in him a fragrance of death, it was "the aroma of Christ to God" (2:15, 16). Paul was "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus... given up to death for Jesus' sake" (4:7-11). "For the sake of Christ" he was "content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities" (12:10). Christ was "crucified in weakness," Paul preached, and so he was content to be "weak in Him" (13:3, 4).

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This was not to admit true defeat, of course, for it was neither the whole picture nor the final one. But it was the apparent one to those who judged by outward appearances (5:12). Christ had suffered in accomplishing salvation. His ministers must suffer in announcing it. It was as simple as that. If this was true in general, it was particularly true of Paul. For he had been divinely commissioned to preach and to suffer many things for the sake of the Suffering Messiah, whom he had himself once persecuted (Acts 9:4, 16; 22:19-21).

The Christ had suffered, not incidentally but purposefully, and as an integral part of His Messiahship according to the prophetic Scriptures. This was the message Paul had received from the risen Jesus (Acts 26:22, 23) and which he had faithfully delivered to his hearers (1 Cor. 15:3; 2 Cor. 13:4; Rom. 15:3, 4). If Paul had persecuted Jesus Himself in afflicting His disciples, no less did he now share in Christ's own suffering in suffering for His sake (cf. Phil. 3:10; Col. 1:24; Rom. 8:17). If some, scandalized by Jesus' suffering and death on the tree, regarded that as an objection to His Messiahship, why should they view the sufferings of His chosen servant with greater esteem? But if Jesus' Messiahship "according to the Scriptures" inherently demanded such "weakness," no

less did Paul's apostleship require drinking the same cup. For just as God had taken occasion in Jesus' "weakness" to show His own power and vindicate Jesus' claims (Rom. 1:4; 1 Tim. 3:16), so now also Paul's "weakness" gave opportunity for the same divine power to be manifested, again validating and vindicating the One whose hope rested wholly in God who raises the dead (2 Cor. 1:9, 10; 4:10, 11; 12:9, 12; 13:3, 4; Phil. 1:28, 29; 2 Thess. 1:4, 5; 2 Tim. 2:11).

All this Paul believed, and therefore he spoke as he did (2 Cor. 4:12-14). For "the day of salvation" and the suffering of the Messiah who had ushered it in were both described centuries earlier in the writings of Isaiah, the prophet whose words Jesus had echoed in commissioning Paul to his own unique ministry.

Isaiah and "The Day of Salvation"

When Paul speaks in 2 Corinthians 6:2 of "the day of salvation," he quotes from Isaiah 49:8. It should not surprise us that this context weighs heavily on his mind, for its words played a prominent part in his apostolic commission, as we have already seen. What might not stand out on first reading is the close connection between "the day of salvation" of 2 Corinthians 6:2 and the persecution and hardship detailed in verses 3-10 which follow. This becomes more striking as we turn to the Isaiah source and find the same relationship there also. The Messianic Servant who brings salvation is the Suffering Servant. As a matter of fact, "salvation" refers first to God's deliverance of the Servant. Only then is it revealed to "all the ends of the earth" (Isa. 52:10).

What happens to the Messiah happens to His people. He is their Representative, their corporate personification. Isaiah 49:3 calls Him "Israel," yet clearly it speaks of the Messiah. Dirk H. Odendaal says:

He can be called "Israel" (49:3), because in himself he comprehends all the hopes, privileges, and responsibilities of Israel, and as Messianic King he leads Israel to the consummation of its calling in the history of salvation.¹

What was true of Israel ideally is literally true of the Messiah. He is the wholly righteous remnant, the shoot out of dry ground, the elect Son who was called out of Egypt. Through Him God will perform His saving will.

Isaiah 49 describes the Messiah's coming and ministry in terms quickly recognizable to the student of the Gospels:

What was true of Israel ideally is literally true of the Messiah. He is

the wholly righteous remnant, the shoot out of dry ground, the elect Son who was called out of Egypt.

1. God calls and names Him before His birth (49:1; see Matt. 1:21).
2. God protects and preserves Him for His mission (49:2; see Matt. 2, 4).
3. God owns and acknowledges Him and promises to be glorified in Him (49:3; see 40:5; Matt. 3:13-17; this theme of "glory" is prominent in John's Gospel).

But the Chosen One (49:7), who will become God's new covenant (49:8) and light of salvation (49:6), is also the "One deeply despised, abhorred by the nations" (49:7). The Servant who will be "exalted and lifted up" is also "marred beyond human semblance" (52:13, 14). He is without "form," "comeliness" or "beauty," "despised and rejected by men," from whom they "hide their faces" (53:2, 3). After all God's glorious promises to Him, the Servant meets apparent defeat, exclaiming, "I have labored in vain, I have spent My strength for nothing and vanity" (49:4; cf. Ps. 22:lff).

Yet He does not despair but rests His hope in God:

For the Lord God helps Me; therefore I have not been confounded; therefore I have set My face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame. -50:7.

In that faith He gives His back to the smiters, His cheeks to those who pull out the beard. He does not hide His face from shame and spitting (50:6). And then, in words which Paul also quotes to encourage Christians in the midst of suffering (Rom. 8:33, 34), the Suffering Servant states His ultimate case:

He who vindicates Me is near;
Who will contend with Me?
Let us stand up together.
Who is My adversary?
Let him come near to Me.
Behold, the Lord God helps Me;
Who will declare Me guilty?-50:8, 9.

God does hear the Servant's cry and delivers Him. He vindicates this One who "walks in darkness and has no light, yet trusts in the name of the Lord and relies upon His God" (50:10). "In a time of favor I have answered You," God says; "in a day of salvation I have helped You. I have kept You and given You as a covenant to the people" (49:8).

God raises His Servant from the dead, and in so doing He has the last laugh (Ps. 2:4). His haughty enemies are scattered and utterly put to shame.

Woe when all men speak well of the church!

This was the Jesus Paul preached, whom he followed, for whose sake he could also glory in suffering. For suffering certified Paul as a true apostle and minister of the new covenant, just as suffering had marked the Messiah who bodily personified the covenant. More than that, suffering marked Paul's day as also being "the day of salvation," when all human hopes failed and the righteous sufferer had to cast himself into the hands of Him who raises the dead. Paul's opponents at Corinth did not know this Jesus, this God, this salvation. Little wonder that they rejected Paul as well!

Let us pray that those who profess to know and represent the Saviour today will demonstrate that acquaintance by a proper evaluation of gospel "success" . . . and gospel suffering. Woe when all men speak well of the church! Beware-beware "The Year of the Evangelical." Far, far better "The Day of Salvation."

¹ Dirk H. Odendaal, *The Eschatological Expectations of Isaiah 4~66 with Special Reference to Israel and the Nations* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1970), p.134.