

Under Construction

In the name of Jesus our Redeemer, dear friends in Christ: Construction sites are messy places. Whether it's building a new home or remodeling an old one, there's no way around it: it won't be pretty and neat while the work is underway. There's going to be loose soil due to excavation and the leveling of the site, forms for concrete, scaffolding, sawdust, scraps of building materials and the wrappers and boxes they came in lying around everywhere, with everything coated in that chalky powder comes from cutting wall board, along with paint cans, stray nails and staples, and who knows what else. We've all been on building sites when work is in progress, so you know what I mean: when a project is under construction, it can look like a disaster zone. And even though you may have a blueprint or drawing that shows you what it's all supposed to look like when the job's done, while it's still underway it can be hard to believe that what you see before you will one day look like the picture.

Let me suggest that the same is true for the life of a Christian. We are works in progress, under construction by the Lord. He holds in his hands the blueprint for what we will become when all things are restored – when we stand with him in glory, and we ourselves will be glorious indeed. But we're not there yet. And in the meantime, well, things can get awfully messy.

This is what St. Paul is saying in today's Epistle lesson taken from his letter to the Christians at Rome when he writes, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us." He's saying, yes, things are difficult and painful now; but the things we suffer are part of God's plan to work in us the changes that will make us the perfected saints he wants us to be. He's got the blueprint. He knows what he's doing. And so, when life gets messy, you can be sure that he has a good purpose for it even if you can't figure out what it is.

And just to be clear, I'd like to unpack just a bit what Paul means when he mentions our present sufferings. We can break them down into three categories. First and most obviously there are the aches, pains, and disappointments of living in this fallen world. Things are not like the Lord originally made them. When our first parents fell into sin, they dragged all of creation down with them. The Lord subjected the whole universe to the curse of death and decay. Why? Well, in part, as a constant reminder to us that it's not going to last. Everything in creation is passing away – which tells us that we ought to be looking for something that won't, like, say, the Word and Promises of God which stand forever. Also, it's to ensure that we don't get too comfortable here in the state of sin. Sin always has bad consequences. It hurts people. If the Lord had not cursed the creation, it would be like he was rewarding us for sinning – which would only encourage us to sin more. That would make us even worse. He doesn't want that. And thus it is that there are natural and manmade disasters and diseases and famines and wars and crime and all the other destructive things that cause human suffering. All people are subject to such things because all are sinners whom the Lord would like to bring to repentance and faith in Jesus the Savior.

But there are other kinds of suffering: two more categories that not everyone experiences. These latter two affect only those who have come to repentance and faith in Christ. Of these, the first is the suffering we endure in our own personal struggle against sin. You see, having been called by the Gospel of Christ crucified for sinners and enlightened by the Spirit of God so that we trust its saving truth, we have been given a new nature – a redeemed,

recreated, holy nature that delights in God's law and seeks to do his will. This new nature coexists with the old sinful nature within each one of us. And the two are at war; one side pulling us toward acts of godly love and self-sacrificial service for others, and the other ruining every thought and action with selfishness and unholy desires. In the preceding chapter of Romans, which we heard a few weeks ago, Paul describes this conflict: "The good that I want to do, I don't do; but the evil I hate is what I keep doing." He says that it's a miserable existence, wanting to do what's right and good, but seeing everything I think and do spoiled by my stinking sin. This, however, is a good sort of suffering because it makes us long for the day when we'll be free of sin's presence in our lives forever. But it's a form of suffering that I fear we don't experience enough of. We're too willing to make light of our selfish thoughts and actions, treating them as if they were no big deal – which is a symptom of spiritual immaturity. Would that the Lord would give us all a greater sense of guilt and shame on account of our sinful thoughts and behaviors, that the level of struggle between our two natures would continue to increase and this sort of suffering intensify in us – so that we might become spiritually mature and trust more in Christ's saving work on our behalf, which is the only solution to the conflict.

All right; then to the suffering we experience from simply living in the fallen world and that we experience as Christians in the fight against the sin in our lives is added one more. It's the persecution we come under because of our faith in Christ. It's also the crucible by which faith is tested. Last week's Gospel was the parable of the soils. Then we heard about the seed that fell in the rocky soil. It stood for those who receive the Gospel gladly at first. Their faith springs up in a shallow sort of way. But the moment there's any trouble or cost connected to it, they fall away. Persecution tends to separate the wheat from the chaff, demonstrating who truly trusts in Christ and who is merely playing at it. You are no doubt aware that in places like Syria, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Sudan, Egypt, and many others, our brothers and sisters in Christ are being put to that test. And from all accounts they are performing admirably – witnessing to the world and to their persecutors that their faith in Christ is worth more to them than their homes, their livelihoods, and their lives. I wonder if we would do the same – we who are at worse subject to some mild ridicule or inconvenience on occasion for believing what we do; and who, I might add, all too often try to hide our faith to avoid any potential problems. I don't know: maybe we're not made to face the test because we're not able to pass it – which goes back to that spiritual maturity thing: something we could all use more of so that we, if and when the test comes, might also perform admirably.

The point to be made is that all of this suffering we endure serves a purpose in God's great plan for us. Each trial that he allows to enter our lives is designed by him to move us closer to the goal. Therefore, while we shouldn't exactly welcome them: "Oh, boy! Now I'm really suffering! Ain't it grand?" We can trust that through our trials our gracious God is doing his work to bring us to completion. And, as Paul says, we can hope with eager longing for the day when the work will be done. And not just us: Paul says the whole creation is groaning as if in childbirth as it waits for the day when it will be delivered forever from the curse that came upon it because of our sin and the sons of God (that's us) will be revealed. Then our bodies too will be redeemed and restored to the sinless perfection and immortality that our first parents once knew.

And in the meantime, through the Word and Sacrament ministry of his Church, the Lord sends us his Holy Spirit to support and strengthen us in our trials. This same Spirit intercedes and prays for us before the throne of the Father because we don't know what we ought to be praying for. I mean, the moment we face any kind of suffering, we want it to end right now. That's what we pray for: immediate relief. And if we had our way, the Lord Jesus would return to restore all things yesterday. But the thing to see is that then God's work on us wouldn't be

complete. The job would only be part way done and you would not attain the level of glory that the Lord has in mind for you when he makes all things new.

Therefore, the Spirit prays for us according to the will of God, offering the petitions that we haven't got the wisdom or insight to pray for ourselves. He knows what's best for us. And he knows that through suffering we develop character and virtues like compassion and kindness. Going without teaches us to be generous when we have. Suffering the loss of a loved one teaches us how to comfort those who are mourning. Being sinned against teaches us to forgive as we have been forgiven. Enduring persecution proves the genuineness of our faith and teaches us to trust in Christ all the more. All of our suffering serves God's good purpose for us in some way, and none of it is worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed to us when his work is through.

So, understanding this and trusting in God's limitless love for us in Christ Jesus our Savior, we wait with patience while we are under construction in this messy world, knowing that the finished project will far exceed anything we could have imagined. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!