

Called to Ministry Class 10
Paul's Call to Suffer
Acts 20:22 ff

That the Apostle Paul had more than one calling was made evident at the outset of his call to conversion and ministry. See Acts 9:15,16 as Ananias is sent to pray for Saul to receive his sight and to be consecrated for a life of ministry, God tells him of Saul's twin ministries. His ministry would be two-fold...proclamation and suffering. See Acts 20:22ff Paul's farewell address to the elders of Ephesus at Miletus.

Suffering as ministry was incomprehensible to many in Jesus' day and was a major reason many rejected Jesus as messiah, see Mk 15:29-32; Lk 23:35-38. It remained incomprehensible in Paul's day and was seen as disqualifying for ministry...just as it was for Jesus. Candidly, suffering as ministry is often incomprehensible in our own time as many look at the suffering of others like Job's friends, who reasoned that stuff happened to Job because Job must have done something wrong or at least God's hand of blessing was clearly not upon him. This was Paul's experience in Corinth as his leadership was questioned by the so-called 'Super-Apostles' purveyors of the 'Health and Wealth Gospel' of their day. As the preacher said, in Ecclesiastes, "There is nothing new under the sun."

It was commonly thought that when the Messiah or King of Israel was reestablished in a kingdom that once begun would never end, that suffering for God's people would end. It is commonly thought today that trusting Christ as Savior will bring prosperity and blessing...and it may...but it may also bring suffering and persecution and even martyrdom. Trusting in Jesus is no guarantee of a life of ease and comfort. Prosperity does not necessarily mean the blessing of God rests upon a person and suffering does not necessarily mean that God is angry with a person or punishing a person.

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his imprisonment by the Gestapo on Nov 18, 1943, "At first I wondered a good deal whether it was really for the cause of Christ that I was causing you all such grief; but I soon put that out of my head as a temptation, as I became certain that duty had been laid on me to hold out in this boundary situation with all its problems; I became quite content to do this, and have remained so ever since (1Peter 2:20; 3:14). 'For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God...But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you are blessed. And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled.' Paul understood that his suffering was for others and for God. 2 Tim 1:11; 2:8f

Job's friends suggest to him that the terrible things that are happening to him must be due to something he or his family did or failed to do...see Job 4:7. This is what is alleged against Paul to explain his suffering. We hear a similar notion from Maria, the postulant as she discovers a whole new life with Captain Von Trapp as she sings, "I must have done something good."

In reading Paul's letters we have one side of a conversation...we are left to fill in the other side and to imagine and reconstruct the other side and context of the remarks. Paul is being used by the "Super Apostles" as the good bad example...you don't want to end up like Paul, do you? Look at his life...is that what you want for yourselves? Paul accepts their challenge and embraces it, saying that his sufferings far from disqualifying him in ministry prove that he is a minister of Christ because he suffers like Christ and for Christ. See 2 Cor 11:1ff and 12:1-10. Paul actually sees his suffering as ministry like his Master, Col 1:24; Eph 3:13; Phil 1:29; Rom 5:3; 2 Tim 2:3. Gal 6:17. See Lk 14:27 and 9:23.

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Paul understood his suffering as an extension of Christ's suffering. He understood it to be purposeful and not bad karma or tough luck. He understood his suffering as an instrument to advance the Kingdom. He understood his suffering to be crucial in the rescue mission of Jesus for the lost. The larger purpose of his suffering gave perspective and encouragement to Paul to not lose heart or give up but to proceed in faith, confident in God.

He knew that his life would be spent for the Gospel...he knew that ultimately it was likely that he would die for the Gospel. He saw the gift of his life as his offering to God, his act of worship. See Rom 12:1ff and 2 Tim 4:6f.

It seems that Paul saw his sufferings as the verification of the power of God at work in and through him. God's sustaining him in the midst of suffering was the Jesus sign or insignia. It was his badge. However imperfectly, Paul believed that when people saw his life, they saw the visual illustration of Jesus and the Cross before their eyes. So it was also with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and sadly so it is also with many Christians today, particularly in the Middle East.