

## In View of Suffering

by Linda Rex

**September 24, 2023, Proper 20 / After Pentecost**—I was thinking the other day about the story of Esau, who sold his birthright for a bowl of lentil soup. It always seemed extreme to me that Esau would trade in his future for the sake of a full stomach, even though know that when person is genuinely starving, any price would be one worth paying to have a morsel of food.

In the Old Testament reading for this Sunday the ancient Israelites complained because they didn't have anything to eat. They told Moses and Aaron that they would have rather gone back into slavery in Egypt where they could have meat, than to continue to suffer. It seems that the nation did not know God very well, or they would have known that the last thing God would have wanted them to do would be to die in the wilderness—all they needed to do was ask him for what they needed rather than complaining and getting mad at Moses (Exodus 16:2–15).

It's easy to point the finger at these people, but if we are honest with ourselves, we are a lot like them. How often do we, when things get difficult or painful, begin believing that God isn't good, that he doesn't care, and that we'd be better off slaves than to have to continue to suffer? How many times have we, instead of seeing our dear Father as the One we turn to when we are in distress, make him or others our scapegoat and the recipient of our complaints and abuse? Or perhaps we sit off in our dark corner muttering in self-pity and grief, believing that we are forsaken and unloved?

Another way we fall into this unhealthy way of thinking and acting is when we bear heavy burdens for a long period of time for the sake of Christ without allowing ourselves to find respite and renewal in healthy ways. Our bodies and minds were not created to endlessly bear up under constant stress and turmoil. The rhythms of our life were meant to include rest and refreshment on a regular basis, as well as seasons of fruitful and productive labor. When we violate this principle, we end up in a place of suffering we weren't meant to bear.

In the gospel passage for this Sunday, Jesus tells a parable about a landowner who hires workers at different times of the day to work in his vineyard. He told each person he would pay them a day's wage for their effort. But at the end of the day, when he began to pay them, he started with those who had only worked a couple of hours. When he gave them a day's wage, the people who had worked hard all day long expected a bigger paycheck. But all they got when the time came was the same day's wage that the others had received. Those who had worked all day long were quite upset, having thought that they might receive more for all the effort they had put in.

Jesus ended his parable with the landowner saying, "Why are you criticizing me for being generous? Can't I do what I want with what is mine?" The people he was talking to needed to be reminded of who God was—the God who loved and cared for his creation so much that he was present with them right then in that moment as God in human flesh, who was going to lay down his life on their behalf. God was willing to go to that extreme to provide all of us with what we needed most—redemption, restoration, and renewal. Jesus closed his conversation with the reminder of what he was facing—that he would be giving himself up to be crucified and would rise again the third day for the sake of all (Matthew 20:1-16).

In Philippians 1:21–30, the apostle Paul shared that he was torn between two strong pulls—to go and be at home with his Lord or to stay and continue to care for the body of Christ. Paul was facing death at the hands of Rome, and knew that apart from the grace of God, he would no longer be able to care for his spiritual brothers and sisters. For Paul, having to suffer for the sake of Jesus Christ was a privilege, not something to complain about. Paul was willing to go all the

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way into death, in order that others might hear and respond to the good news. Paul held tightly to the truth of who God was. In his mind, no doubt, was God's own description of himself rehearsed by the psalmists of his people, "The LORD is gracious and merciful; slow to anger and great in lovingkindness" (Psalm 145:8). Unlike Jonah, who objected to God showing compassion for the non-Jews, Paul sought the redemption and salvation of all, and resonated with the loving heart of our Father, even to the point of laying down his life.

It was in this place of self-offering Paul encouraged the believers to stand firm in their unity in Christ. He reminded them that suffering and opposition were part of the package, but that they would continue to grow up in Christ as they labored together in one spirit to share the good news of salvation. By the Spirit, they were reminded of who God was—the One who was and would be with them unto the end. We can find great encouragement in these words today. For whatever we may endure for the sake of the gospel and our Lord Jesus Christ, our benefit is life eternal, in blessed union and communion with God and one another, now and forever.

*Heavenly Father, forgive our stubborn insistence that we are forsaken, unloved, and forgotten. You are always compassionate, merciful, slow to anger, and full of lovingkindness. Grant us the grace to suffer for your name's sake, no matter the cost to ourselves. Grant us also the grace to care for ourselves, to find rest and renewal in you, so we can continue the journey, through Jesus and by your Spirit. Amen.*

*"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith, so that your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my coming to you again. Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel; in no way alarmed by your opponents—which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you, and that too, from God. For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me."* Philippians 1:21–30 NASB